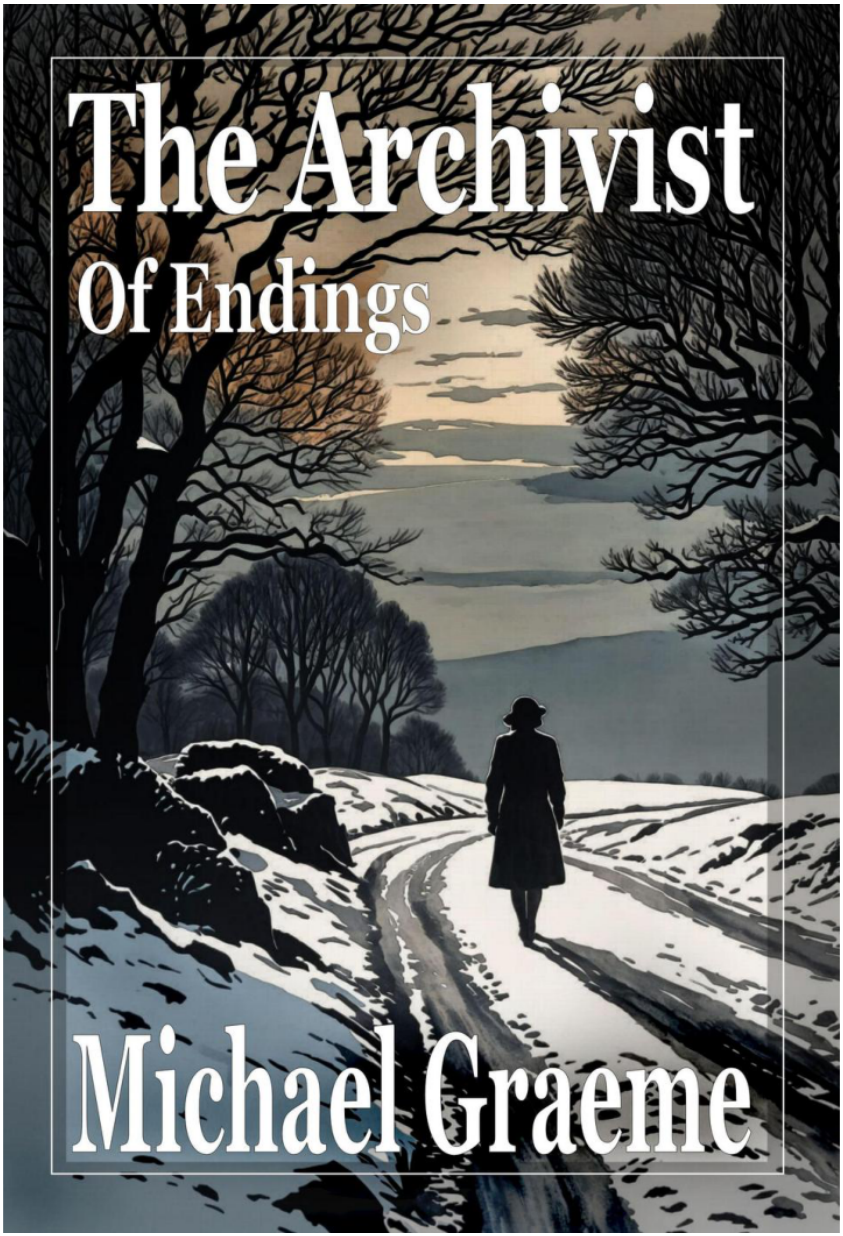
The Archivist
Of Endings
Michael Graeme

The Archivist of Endings
by
Michael Graeme
~ Internet Archive Edition ~

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The Archivist of Endings

One

I have dreamed of her more than once. A fierce creature, neither youth nor crone. Timeless, she appears in the garb of the Brythonic, or at least what passes for such in the modern imagination. I approach her, knee deep in the river's headwaters – that place where the old wood stands and the branches overhang both banks. And it's there, in that shaded sanctuary, she pours the river's source from a cauldron of shining bronze.

So writes Elias Hartgrave, engraver, printer, editor of the Craven Morning Post, in 1836. And then a snatch of verse:

Flame-haired, she stands in robes of jade,
A shining cauldron tilted toward the stagnant pools,
whence pours the river. And I in stupor tread,
As though bewitched by poppied sorcery.
And with a gaze that cleaves me to the soul,
she says: "No more with such impunity....
....shall they pass my gate"
Her voice like liquid....

Liquid what?

The ink fades here, as if Hartgrave did not himself trust it. Is it "silk" perhaps? No, too corny. He was a better poet than that. But then this is just a dream-sketch. He would have tidied it up elsewhere, firmed the myth, the image. He seems a man interrupted at this point, goes on in a different vein – same day December 12th - but in the evening perhaps, after a day's labour, when the dreams have long faded:

Winter comes early to the Dales, and lingers long. The valley deeps are blocked with snow for weeks on end, now. The little communities therein, although invisible to our townsfolk scrutinies, continue their unassuming lives, entirely oblivious to the noise of the world that otherwise deafens us. Meanwhile, I peck at the margins, glean what news of the bucolic I can, while year on year, season on season, feeling myself more an Archivist of Endings, than a prognosticator of truth, and fresh beginnings...

His times were changing. As indeed are mine.

"I'll be going then, Mr Hunter."

"Hmm?"

I look up from the desk, from Hartgrave's neat jottings to find Miriam buttoning up her coat. Is it three o'clock already? Heavens, how the day has flown.

"Will you not let me run you, Mrs Doyle? Or at least wait a while until the rain passes."

"By then we shall be losing the light, Mr Hunter. And a body has no business being about these parts at such times, just now."

"Then..."

"No, I will not trouble you for a lift. But thank you all the same."

"As you wish. And... Mrs Doyle?..."

But she's already turned, is making for the door. I hear it close, and she's gone with barely a disturbance in the air. She once promised me she would be quiet going about my things, and she has kept her word, though, as I suspected, she has lately become more housekeeper than cleaner. It is an unspoken truth however that men like me are better kept and cleaned, at arm's length.

As is her way.

So, back to Hartgrave. What is he now, as I piece him together from these fragments? He is a handful of digitised letters from the National Library of Scotland, and he is a journal from the archives of the University of Leeds. I am the first to read him in two hundred years. Hartgrave, though a sensitive and original poet, did not set the world ablaze, though this is not to say he lacked insight or craft. He lived cleanly, and his children and grandchildren's names are dotted all over the county still. Unlike others of his kind, he left behind no scandal and lived, at least on the surface, quite an ordinary life. No wonder he is forgotten.

But my... how he dreamed.

We don't see as much snow nowadays as he describes. The tops are dusted intermittently, as the season progresses, but the upland meadows are generally clear, the paths heavy going though, and unpleasant to walk. Nowadays, it is the rain I would write most about. Heavens these late November rains! How they swell the rivers to bursting, and flood the plains! The spring and summer months in Sommerton are a blessing, but the autumns brace us for what is to come, and the winters are a time of shoulders to the wind, as the gales rattle the roofs, and bend the willows to the ground.

Archivist of endings, did he say?

He speaks poetically, and in a register somewhat obscure. But there was something in the life and times of Hartgrave that finds resonance with my own. And in his tone, also, I find kinship with a man who has transcended the disinformation and spin of his day. Nor does he argue for Whig or Tory, or beat the Chartist's drum. He speaks instead in mythic terms, measures his days by recourse to nature's balms and curses.

And he dreams of their forgotten deities.

I hope Miriam is all right. There is a stubbornness in her I would not like to test to its destruction. She will be soaked by the time she makes it home, but will not complain of it. And she will be back here tomorrow as if nothing had happened. She is herself a force of nature.

No, she does not recommend being about after dark just now. She's referring to the dark also of the moon, which my clock tells me began last night, and will run into tomorrow. I second her advice, though for different reasons. I don't know if she sees things or imagines them, though in her world that amounts to pretty much the same.

The portrait of Anne Whittingstall, over the fireplace, catches my eye. Flame haired, pale skinned, fluffy blue rock-chick jacket. 70's vibe.

"Well, what? Would you have had me ask her to stay the night?"

"Oh, no. I'd advise you never to do that."

"Well, exactly then."

Yes, I still talk to Anne. It is, after all, very quiet up here. She is such an unlikely muse, occasional haunter of my dreams - art teacher and first adolescent love, from half a century ago. But she makes more sense than most human beings I know, including myself.

Pass through my gate, though? And with impunity? I wonder if that's what the deity actually said in the dream, because if she did, that would be really interesting. I don't mean that we might make a sound-bite of wisdom from it. These are, after all, two hundred year old dreams we are attempting to analyse. But in their resonance, I sense also...

A deepening.

Two

My researches tell me the Whigs had the upper hand of parliament in Hartgrave's day. They were the party of the industrialists, the new money-men. Of course, we were not yet even a nominal democracy - the common man had no vote, and was considered with little more regard than a beast of burden. The Tory party in those days represented the interests of the medieval tradition, the landed, the titled, the old money. I imagine they felt themselves to be losing ground to the age of steel and steam, to the impertinence of commerce. But, as the Peterloo massacre demonstrated, they were also armed to the teeth, and determined we would not go the way of France.

It reminds me, how much my generation grew up in a bubble of relative peace and prosperity for all. Wars were fought in far away lands, and there was no conscription to steal our sons. News was rationed and sanitised, came in manageable chunks. But there is nothing so volatile as human nature, and no greater illusion than permanence.

The storm comes on in the early evening which, in the season, and in the moon's dark too, already has the feel of midnight. Rain pelts at the windows and a riot of wind sets the beams a-creaking. I have lived in many houses, but none possessed the gentle reassurance of Hill Top. Others tell me there is a presence here. I am perhaps the only one who does not feel it, though this is not to say I don't trust in its protection, so long as I do not offend it.

Each winter seems worse than the last. Not colder, certainly not with the snow-blocked isolation of Hartgrave's time. I can still drive into town for coffee and company most days. But there is now such a violence to the weather, the old Earth pushing back and saying: *so you really think you're stronger than me?* However, thus far, the house stands firm, protected by a shoulder of the hill and an old covert let go to nature, now.

It would already have been a century old by Hartgrave's time, and the builders chose the site well. I am still protected, it seems, by their wisdom. Nowadays we build in places where we know the rivers flood – the old gods are forgotten, so they come at us like demons.

The goddess spoke of impunity, of hubris, and passage.

My work on Hartgrave was begun as a sideline, as an indulgence, a favour to the Reverend Paul, who had introduced us. I had thought I might get a little biographical chap-book out of it, something he could sell for Church funds - not that the church needs it these days. I had not expected Hartgrave to become such a daemonic presence himself, nor to discover in his work talk of the presence of daemons.

But, like all daemons, they are best consumed in small doses, so we shut down the machine, remove the stick, return it home to the hollowed out copy of Palgrave's Golden Treasury. Then we slide it back on the shelf, between Jung's Mysterium, and Wordsworth's Prelude. Thus we put Hartgrave to bed, along with our own musings for the night.

I still permit myself no Internet here, no phone, no doom-scrolled news of the world, no horrors beamed as infotainment while I take breakfast or supper. The thought offends me now, the way it used to be, how it still is for many. So now, we let the house breathe, and me with it. I take a glass of unpretentious supermarket whiskey, and catch up with the literary fashions, via a copy of Lorem Ipsum magazine.

I have sent them a few poems lately. Oh, it was months ago. I don't know why I have begun doing this again – perhaps only so I can claim with less awkwardness, to be a poet. They have yet to acknowledge their receipt, for such is the way of poetry still. No, it's more than that. I do it to honour the work, show it the door, let it have its chance of freedom, of sunshine, and broader horizons. In the old days it always came back with a shrug and a smile, preferring, I suppose, my own company. I do not suppose it will be any different now. I seem always to be out of kilter with the times.

As I turn the pages, I note my published contemporaries are still largely lamenting the Zeitgeist as a broken world, and one that might yet be repaired if only "people" would listen. If only we could go back ten, or twenty years, find the reverse gear! Or why cannot the swaggering tyrants who oppress us have the good grace to drop dead? But that world is already gone. The swagger, the tyranny is also the Zeitgeist. I feel my own poetry revealing of a deeper cycle. Yes, we're caught in the depths of winter, but there will come a spring – just not in any of our lifetimes.

Says the Archivist of Endings.

We set the magazine aside, our head somewhat assaulted by its

jagged offerings, and we answer the chimes of the clock, calling us to bed. It is a bed indicative of advancing age and solitude, being overly wide and mostly empty space, though it is also an altogether more comfortable arrangement, in terms of patterned fabric and goose-down – this being thanks to Miriam, who declared from the outset my chamber to be unfit for a poet, and a man who dreams.

When I think back to the days of my marriage, and bed sharing – at least for the purposes of sleep – I realise how much I prefer now to sleep alone, but still I wonder: am I really past loving? Must the necessity of solitude so firmly eliminate the treasure of the touch of another?

The storm blows itself out in the night, moves east to wreak its havoc elsewhere. I do not hear it go. Sleep comes in episodes, as it often does these days, each deepening as the pages are turned, and with each turning the half-presence of images eventually settle into dreams. In the waking periods I try to catch their tails as they slip back into the underworld, preserve them in memory. Sometimes they are playful and beckon me, sometimes elusive.

I lie awake awhile, listening to the house, and think again of Hartgrave's river goddess, standing at her source, guarding passage, pouring out the river from a bronze cauldron. It is a striking image. I could perhaps attempt an artwork of it. Miss Whittingstall would approve, for I have been letting that side of things go recently. He would be talking about the River Ware, I suppose. It rises in the Dales to the west, runs east, and rather prettily through Sommerton. I know the source, a lovely spot, picnicked there with my boys when they were little – old days, family days, days of conventionality. All gone now, moved on.

Perhaps solitude is not an absence, after all, but more of a narrowing, an old gate drawn half closed, through which fewer things, events, people, might pass into our lives. If so, then in common with the protagonist of the Myth of Er, I have chosen my lot knowingly, and without regret. We do not seek to change the world, Hartgrave and I, but count only those things passing through it. And it's true, we tend not to see beginnings, only endings. He can no more imagine my time than I can imagine a future two hundred years from now.

Yet, there are questions still to be asked, murmurings of the old gods, things we cannot answer for certain, though we are challenged by our times to do so.

Three

The morning brings calm and clear skies of a soft winter-blue. A slender con-trail marks out its great circle – a lone jet heading south, reminder of a world beyond my horizons. The contrast with the wildness of the night is startling, as is the implicit warning of nature's capriciousness. I drive into Sommerton to find the power is cut. Wendy's tearooms are closed. I had been hoping for breakfast.

The only business open is Mr Reade's second-hand bookshop. I am not short of reading material, but can never resist a browse, and Mr Reade has begun to look out for titles he thinks might interest me. He sits at his desk with a small camping lantern, flicking through a copy of Raven's Nest Magazine. A small paraffin heater maintains a gentle cosiness. Tweed jacket and waistcoat, he seems quite unmoved by events.

"Good morning, Mr Reade."

"Mr Hunter."

I am reminded I once sent some poems to the Raven. It was a venerable institution in its day. But that was – oh, dear me – decades ago now, and have yet to hear anything. But, since I recall the magazine folded just after the crash, I doubt I shall be hearing anything now. Sadly, such is also the way of poetry. I forget which poems they were. Perhaps I should look them up. No doubt I would consider them poor now, but at least they would be a reminder of other times, and of distance travelled.

"Heavens wherever did you find a copy of the Raven?"

"Oh, picked up half a dozen of them at a flea market in Otley. Would you be interested?"

In fact, I am not. Indeed I feel a certain grudge against the Raven which is, of course, rather childish of me. But, since I suspect these were acquired with me in mind, and the proceeds of Mr Reade's shop go largely to charity, rather than an editor's pockets,...

"Tenner the lot," he says. "Very collectible."

"Em... yes. I'll take them. Terrible storm last night."

The storm hit hard last night, but he tells me it was Cumbria that bore the brunt. He describes centuries-old bridges swept away, towns flooded. The west coast main line is down at Carlisle, the M6 closed at Shap by a landslide. And the Internet is broken. He indicates a battery wireless on the shelf behind him as the source of

his information. He seems rather proud of it. I am tempted to say 'how quaint'.

Then I have a flashback to winter school mornings, snow mornings, storm mornings, and my mother listening to local radio, listing the schools reported closed. I would wait in hope, then catch her eye when my school's name failed to be announced – reminder of a life I never felt I was meant to engage with, more to stand apart from and observe. Reminder too of a life, and the first feelings of betrayal, that those I loved could not protect me from a thing greater than themselves, though they were themselves the world to me.

Strange feeling. A shift in the mood, and for no reason. But lately the body and the mind have been reacting ahead of time, defences set by seemingly innocuous triggers. It presages something.

"So... we got off lightly?"

Reade gives a sagely shake of the head, tells me the cell tower on the moor has blown over.

"No mobile or 5G the length of the valley, Mr Hunter." He smiles, knows we are both of an age, and can remember times before there were such things.

"Then how shall we manage, Mr Reade?"

"Indeed, Mr Hunter."

So, having staked my claim to the magazines, I spend a while browsing his shop anyway. While doing so, I hear the door bell ring, something anxious in it. A man enters, early middle years, well groomed. A big man, muscular, a haunted look about him as he consults his dead phone. He cuts a striking figure, a quality to his casual dress. He enquires of Reade somewhat abruptly if he has Internet. Reade explains that so far as he knows it is all broken, no power, and the tower is down. The man seems to relax a little at the news, offers his belated thanks, goes on his way. Reade gazes out of the window at the receding figure.

"Have you met Mr Elliot yet?" he asks.

"Elliot? No."

"He's new. American. Bought the old Rectory. Well... he's living in a caravan next door for now, while the builders go to work on it."

I'd heard the diocese was selling the place. But, heavens, it was falling down. "Does he know what he's getting into?"

"I don't suppose he's not short of a bob or two. He strikes me as

one of those refugees who've been heading our way lately."

Ah, indeed, this is an unfortunate feature of our times. But wait! The name sounds familiar now. Could he be *that* Elliot? Sam Elliot. Tech billionaire? I have read about him only recently.

"Somewhat brash," Reade goes on. "He'll win few friends round here with that manner."

"He struck me as a little... anxious?"

"Indeed so, Mr Hunter. No excuse though."

Perhaps I'm jumping to conclusions; Sam Elliot washing up in Sommerton, for it was always an in-between place, never one of destination – well, except for me, but then it was my dreams and Miss Whittingstall that brought me here. If it's true then Elliot is rumoured to have left most of his fortune, and his business empire behind.

Sanctioned by his government. De-banked.

Heavens. What must that be like?

I am not entirely without news, you see? It tends to find its way to my door eventually, though somewhat out of breath, chased over hill and dale, and in the mean-time stripped of its hype and spin, its helium of outrage. I wouldn't say it arrives as facts exactly, but as close as we can come to them these days.

"No excuse? True, Mr Reade. Still, poor chap. I mean, a caravan in winter."

"Well fair enough, Mr Hunter. Rather him than me."

Reade does not seem to have made the same connection, which is odd since he is usually far better informed than I – indeed I consider him a reliable source of intelligence regarding Sommertonia. Still, I decide not to help embellish, or probe for what might, after all, exist no further than my imagination. Of course, Reade, being a man normally careful with his own words, we might both be playing the same game. But if true, Elliot has sought Sommerton's anonymity as a means of escaping peril. And on arriving has made few friends, least of all Mr Reade.

And that's a pity.

Naturally, it's impossible to tell a man's story from so brief an encounter, but we poets have been doing so for millennia – indeed we have been known to spin entire universes from grains of sand. Were I to write a poem about Elliot, naturally, it would be one of exile, of Icarus fallen. But I remember most that haunted look, a potent precursor – that when a man's phone goes dead, he thinks

first of persecution, rather than an innocent interruption of service.

Act of malice over act of god.

Another one for the archives.

Of endings.

Four

The centre of town has flooded. It should have drained into the river, but something is holding it back. The road is passable but cars are inching through it cautiously, axle deep. A lone man stands up to his shins, on what would be the pavement. He is fishing about in the gutter with a rake.

Gareth.

Odd how he appears at those times when I need him, even when I don't know I need him.

He sees me watching, waves me over and I stand on the edge of the inundation. It has a prettiness about it, as it reflects a clear sky and a low glancing sun. I ask if he knows if Miriam made it home all right.

It was Gareth who brought her to Hill Top in the first place, and against my better judgement. I only agreed because he told me she was his sister, and I felt I owed him. That she is his sister I don't doubt, at least of a kind, though not in blood, because she has since told me so. But then Gareth always was a cunning man. He reassures me Miriam can look after herself which, again, I have never doubted, but still...

Gareth knows many things, but on the subject of Miriam Doyle he becomes immediately opaque.

He makes contact with something under the water, rakes up a plug of dead leaves. Then, with a roar, the water settles into a satisfying vortex, and the flood relieves itself slowly into the drains, and thence to the river.

"Didn't realise you were on contract with the council, Gareth." I'm joking, trying to come at him obliquely. We both know the council would never employ a man like him.

"Eh? Am I buggery. By the time they get their act together it'll be spring. How's it going with Miriam anyway?"

"It's going well. I am grateful. It's just..."

"She can be a bit odd... I told you, you mustn't mind that."

"I don't mind her oddness, Gareth. We seem to get along all right. I was just...."

"Well, then. Don't worry so. How's the work going anyway?"

He changes the subject. More evasion. I'd better leave it. He asks about the work, and I can never answer, because I never know.

After all, how does one measure the weight of dreams, and imagination? Were I a jobbing hack, I could point to word-counts and submissions made, rejections received. But I have never been that kind of writer, that kind of poet.

I motion to the river, swollen to capacity just now, and squeezing ominously under the arches of the town bridge. I'm trying to imagine the immense pressure on its flank. Eighteenth century structure, up against the extraordinary storms of the present.

"Not much of a gap there. Reade tells me there are bridges down in Cumbria."

"Aye. But we should be all right. River's peaked about now."

Still, it looks ominous, the great plain of it, a confused direction of flow, as if it's backing up, and great eddies swirling like dreams of darkness.

"If rivers could speak eh? What tales they might tell."

Gareth smiles. "This'll be one of you poems will it?"

"No, just been thinking about rivers, lately. Flow. History."

He senses something in me, that I'm struggling for connection – connection with him and his world. He knows my trade, as well as I know his, which is to say we know enough of one another's crafts to pay due courtesy. Still ankle deep, and I note barefoot, in the receding flood, he leans on his rake, lends me his full attention.

"Oh, aye."

"This guy I'm researching, Victorian poet. Lived here, writes about a river deity. Could he be talking about our river? The Ware?"

"Could be," he says. "Most big rivers will have had a deity, I suppose. Most of them forgotten. Maybe he was talking about the Wharfe, and Verbeia."

"I didn't get that impression. He would have named her, I think, if it had been Verbeia. No, this came out of a dream."

A shadow passes over him, "Dream you say?"

"The way he worked, it feels... familiar to me. So, there are no old folk tales of deities associated with our river then? I've checked online..."

Gareth shakes his head, dismissive. "Won't be nothing online. This is folk memory if it's anything. And if it's written, it's in places the Internet don't reach."

"We're talking dusty archives then?"

I have the feeling he knows something, but dealing with Gareth is not like dealing with the Internet – input-output. Here we have

two imaginations circling one another, looking for patterns of connection. It takes time. It takes sleep and dreams, and synchronistic encounters.

"So, " he says. "You've been dreaming of her too?"

Her. He said 'her'. But then perhaps all river deities are female.

"No. But I suppose if I do it'll be from reading Hartgrave - he's an evocative writer."

"'Appen so, Richard. But, all the same, be careful."

"Then you *do* know something?"

"Maybe. Not sure. I'll need to ask around. But for now it's just that... well... a long forgotten spirit like that... they don't always waste away, do they. They can come at you like a genii out of a bottle. Three wishes and full of riddles... and you might think you have the measure of them, until you realise... you don't."

"I suppose Hartgrave could just have made her up. You know how those old Romantics were? Maybe I should set him aside for a bit. He's been getting under my skin."

"How did it feel to you, what he wrote?"

"Felt like a vision, Gareth."

He nods, understanding or just caution, I don't know. The main thing is he takes me seriously, when others would find me ridiculous. "Like I said, I'll think on it. But best put a ring of steel round your dreaming for now, Richard." He steers us back into friendly banter: "Speaking of old Romantics, how's things between you and the reverend?"

"There is nothing between me and the reverend. Now, shall I start talking about the weather, and what a nice day it is?"

He tips back his head, laughs, has a look of Neptune, rising from the deep with his rake for a sceptre. "Ah well, don't get too settled. Reckon we're in the eye of it just now. We'll be getting the back hand of it by tea-time. Anyway, I'd better be moving on, or I'll have to be charging the council for my time. Or more like they'll be fining me for interfering with their drains."

He's done a good job though, intervening where it was needed, and without the asking. If there is anything more to Hartgrave's vision, Gareth will make the connections, and probably by not looking for them. That's just the way it works.

"Be seeing you, Gareth."

"Aye, take care now, Richard."

Back at the car, I feel a patter of words, a rhythm emerging, and

I make some jottings in the margins of the old Raven magazine – just somewhere to hold the essence of it while I get it home. It's hard to say if it means anything, but when words come ready formed out of nowhere, it's best to take note.

Pressed thin by the weight of days,
measured, and no longer approved.
His name withdrawn from the book...

So that's Elliot, then or at least my exploring a myth that fits him.

The daemon neither cruel nor kind,
asks no permission...
Old questions returning.
but slips through the gate
of mind....

The gate again? Gates and goddesses and Elliot. A demonic something or other, and all mixed up together. A genii, three wishes and full of riddles. This will take some unravelling, but I feel there is a road opening, and a journey's potential. But for what I don't know. Same as usual, I suppose: a deepening.

Afternoon, now, and a pale, watery light spills across my desk from the window. Hartgrave's Victorian diction is infectious, and I struggle against it creeping into my own work, infecting it. But we're only scratching out ideas here, not seeking to be anthologised for posterity. If our imaginations merge across the centuries, and language blurs, what difference does it make so long as what emerges has a coherence? What difference, if it forms an image long enough to get the pattern of it, before it disappears back into the void?

As I work, clouds appear on the western horizon and slowly consume the fells. The sun is taken early. Gareth was right about the other end of the storm catching us up. But there's also a softness to it, and I anticipate only a dense overcast, a settling in of more rainfall. Perhaps days of it. I think once more of that old bridge with the weight of the weather on it.

The outer can erase a man,
as the inner drowns
by careless invitation.
One by narrowing,
the other by opening wide.
But the poet must risk it anyway,

not to preserve what he is,
for who knows what he is?
But to be what the daemon
says he must become?

The poet's dilemma – how to achieve sufficient depth to make a difference, but not so deep you'll never find your way back, to tell the tale.

Ring of steel around your dreams tonight, Richard.

Five

The monastery sits both at the centre of a busy town, yet also aloof somehow, and is approached as if along a desert road. It has something of both the eastern and the western traditions about it, the Castle of the Grail perhaps, yet thinly peopled with meditating pilgrims in shadowed alcoves, eyes half closed, awareness turned inward. They are tended by robed women - not exactly what one might call nuns. They are more like priestesses, their hair covered as in the Persian tradition. But the definitions blur, and have no real meaning. This is the imagination in all its polytheistic diversity, working a narrative for which it seeks no audience.

As I approach the gate, often confused after a day of over-thinking, a pair of them emerge, each to take an arm and guide me through to the interior. Behind us, the gate closes with a resounding thud and echoes faintly throughout the halls.

Sanctuary.

I am bathed by them, tenderly, lovingly – warm water poured from earthen jugs. There is nothing erotic in this. They tend me as a child, or as my grandfather was tended by his wife, home from the mines, black with dust, a tin bath by the fire, and all the day's residues washed from him. Sometimes then, I am settled directly into bed, or sometimes to the sandy courtyard where, too, I meditate, feeling the energy of the body rising and falling upon the breath.

At some point, within this imaginal world, I find sleep.

And then, most nights now, I dream.

All of this is precautionary, a little corny, perhaps, and fair enough, but it's also a natural gateway into the realm of the imaginal. I used to do this differently, with even more romantic glamour – a ring of Amazons, silver breastplates shining in fantasy tradition, curved blades ready to cut down any approaching dream wraiths that did not mean me well. It was literally a ring of steel. But the temple of dreams is a more recent discovery, and gentler in its precautions, a place I seek when I feel the floodgates might be about to break. Its processes are different, but just as effective.

The night passes quietly, and with each soft waking I resume my place in the courtyard. If I have dreamed, the tail ends are elusive and resist attempts at teasing them back. Sometimes I will take an

imaginary broom, and sweep dust from the tiles, until sleep beckons once more, or the dawn light becomes too persistent, and the day calls.

It was not Gareth's fault, but he amplified that seed in me of Hartgrave's Brigantian woman, bearer of the source. And he reminded me not all those who seek us out in dreams are *of* us. To take sanctuary delays, for a while, the projections of one's own stories, one's own soul deepenings. But they will catch up eventually, to be vetted by the temple women, and granted access to perception. But the gods are powerful, and I wonder how strong such defences are – if they would survive a sustained assault by a deity once honoured and then ignored for two thousand years.

Morning sees not much by way of dawn. There is a thick overcast, almost scraping the chimney pots. I am entirely off-grid at Hill Top, disconnected by drain or wire. In this half-light season, I must be frugal with power, or I shall run the batteries down. Thus twilight can last all day, a single lamp on the desk, as I work, or read.

Midday and Miriam appears, a slender, ageless figure in the doorway, shaking out her coat. She is a little out of her time in dress - always something of the nineteen forties about her, well pressed and starched. Always tweed, or wool or cotton, I suspect. I cannot fathom it, do not try and would not dare to enquire.

"Good afternoon Mrs Doyle."

"Mr Hunter."

"You... managed all right in the rain?"

"I did."

Leave it there, now. You know she does not appreciate a fuss.

I cast an eye once more over yesterday's poem, see if anything fresh drops out of it. I could refine it in places, clarify my meanings, smooth the language, but that would be an attempt to elevate it for the likes of Lorem Ipsum, which would only collapse its energy. And I know well enough what it means. Its work is done.

A man who is too deeply invested in the material world, a man who dismisses his dreams has no means of deepening himself beyond the efforts of his own ego. And Ego alone digs but a shallow grave. I don't know if that is Elliot's story, but if it is, it has a mythic dimension to it. Conversely, a man who would explore the depths of his own imagination must be worthy of each further fathom plumbed, or he is no better off. And you must be careful you do not

cut off your own retreat. To be trapped in the fathoms is to invite psychosis.

And worse, let the wrong daemon through that gate, you will be grateful for the shallow grave.

"You'll take coffee, Mr Hunter?"

"I will. Thank you, Mrs Doyle."

And one for yourself, I'm thinking. Draw up a chair and talk to me. Let us share vulnerabilities to the point where you at least call me Richard, and permit me Miriam. But that would be to soften a reserved tension, which I must admit I think I prefer, for all its strangeness, and its unspoken etiquette.

I had thought her a woman fallen into difficulty, that Gareth's intervention, his pressing her upon me was by way of protection. But that was back in the summer, and nothing about her suggests this is a woman who needs protecting from anything.

Was it just a matter of the little money I pay her, or something more Gareth had in mind? His instincts, after all, entail discretion in all things, whereas mine incline a little more towards a carefully paced journey of relationship. He and Miriam might keep a secret their whole lives, and feel no need for disclosure.

No, it's not that I am a man of reckless bravado – by now that should be obvious. Mine is more a measured standing at the threshold, sensing how far to advance, and when to retreat. Miriam understands this, I think, though we shall likely never speak of it. She has her own thresholds, her own rules of passage, and she keeps them as one keeps a fire banked: not gone out, not by a long way, but never allowed to leap into animated expression.

She brings coffee. The chrome jug is cleaned to perfection – not dull with dust and grease, like in the days when I had charge of my own kitchen. And she pours carefully. *Brigantian woman. Brythonic keeper of the source*. Outside, the overcast presses ever lower against the hill, dissolving reality. Meanwhile the house seems to draw in on itself, conserving warmth, and light.

And once again, I have the sense that something is given flow, somewhere beyond my immediate knowing. It is not yet pressing at my gate, but like that swollen river squeezing under the town bridge, pressure is mounting.

"I'll be getting on then," she says.

She has left a biscuit on the side of my saucer. Just a small jam ring. I was always partial to them, but have not bothered buying

any recently – not given as I am these days to more earthly treats. She must have brought them herself, carried them up the hill in her pocket. And not for the first time I wonder if her coming was intended for her own protection, or mine.

Six

St Andrews is a fine old church. It is English history taken root, and grown in stone – Norman, Saxon, Medieval, but mostly later Victorian. Its organ sounds a little asthmatic now, though played with gusto on this damp, drizzly Sunday morning. The muted hymn singing, not exactly lifting the roof, does little to disguise it. The liturgy stands the test of time, but there is no escaping the flatness of proceedings. Only Amanda, newly promoted to vicar, (acting and temporary) adds depth, with a sermon approaching the level of poetry.

I am not a church person, but I have grown bored with total hermitage, and it is a good way to mingle with my fellow Sommertonians. Some might call me somewhat pagan in outlook, were I forced to explain myself, but Amanda's God has not yet seen fit to strike me down for it, so I suppose I am forgiven my non-dualism. To mingle, and to smile, even if not to speak, is to be treated with less suspicion as the incomer, which I suppose I shall always be here. The alternative would be to prop up the bar of the Ploughman's Rest, but I am not social drinker, nor a garrulous man. St Andrews it is then, though I am careful to maintain my distance from the language of faith, when conversation does occasionally seek me out.

And then of course, Amanda and I already have a little history between us, though not as much as is rumoured, nor of the kind suggested by Gareth's banter. Lately though, I feel she has become more flirtatious, as ridiculous as that sounds at our age – well mine at least. But again, I would consider us friends, and sometimes banter is permitted the mantle of flirtatiousness. Eros, with a crown of Irony.

Service done, Amanda makes for the door, prelude to the press of hands, as the congregation files out to receive God's blessing by proxy of her smile and soft hands, or more likely recorded evidence of their attendance. As she passes, I look to catch her eye, but she ignores me. Long grey clerical skirts and a glowing white cassock over the top, red hair fastened back, she cuts an attractive figure, inadvertent temptress of a man's projections – perhaps every man here, especially the married ones, and news of her past indiscretions not yet worn thin after all the excited gossip of the summer.

Heavens, how time moves on!

But my eye is caught mostly by a lone man, not quite sitting at the back, but a few rows in front of me: Elliot.

St Andrews will seat two hundred at a push, barely a tenth of that here today. Yet he waits for them to thin out, before he joins the tail end, thinking perhaps he is last, only then to notice me still waiting, and passive. I do not get a second glance.

Sundays are not the best time to speak with Amanda – there is always an entourage of worthies swelling around her. It's just pleasant to feel the old place winding down. I once asked her what was the smell that came with old churches. She said it was either mice and centuries old mould, or it was sanctity. Mice and mould I suspect there is aplenty, and not just the little mouse-man carvings on the pews. Sanctity, I don't know. There is devotion certainly, and expectation, but also fear, love, grief, and joy. The imagination permits all of this, and more.

Christenings, weddings, funerals, there is a long chain of continuity here. A thousand years of it. But dwindling now. Are these more endings to be archived, perhaps? I hope not. I feel there are still answers here, ways of shaping a man's soul, and weathering what is to come, if the orthodox priesthood could only find the voice and, well... the imagination for it. I see it, feel it in Amanda, but she is treated with suspicion by both diocese and dwindling congregation, who prefer their bread buttered the way it always has been, and, like everything else, increasingly thin.

I am certain it is Sam Elliot, now I have seen him more clearly. I have also checked the news, back-numbers at the library, refreshed my memory of his story, or at least the one being told, checked it from several angles to attain the average. It would be easy to make a villain of such a man, easy to feel no sympathy for such a meteoric fall from grace. I mean... to have had so much, so big a life and then be deleted.

The closest I can come to it is imagining my memory stick, on which I have at least twenty years of poetry writings, also deleted. I would be stripped bare. No history. No beginning. And the ending I had imagined for myself would be forever subverted. There would only be the present, and the clothes I stand up in. It makes no difference to the soul, of course, yet still we resist such annihilation. Or rather the difference to the soul is in the way we resist it. Or not.

Something like that.

He does not look a bad man. Middle forties, a good thick head of salt and pepper hair, that square jaw so familiar from Hollywood male stereotypes. There is a solidity to him, a gym worked body. There might even be a grace about him, I'm sure, if he did not still look haunted, so braced for assassins lurking behind pillars and around corners.

I linger until I feel conspicuous in my aloneness. I would not like Amanda to come back and mistake me for a man praying. She would make too much of that, so I make my move, prepare to glad-hand like any other parishioner at the door, share the silent joke of it, that curious unspokenness between us.

"Lovely to see you, Richard."

"Wonderful sermon."

Blush. "Oh, you thought so?"

Except, she is not there. The porch is occupied only by a gaggle of gossiping worthies. I pass them by, step out into the cool drizzle and erect my umbrella. She has moved the length of the churchyard and stands now in the shelter of the ivied lych gate, in what looks like an intimate discussion with Elliot. This is not vicar/parishioner banalities. There is a seriousness about her, a solemn solicitousness she normally reserves for funerals.

She knows him.

According to Reade he's doing up the old rectory, until recently owned by the diocese. It could be something to do with that, but, whatever *that* is, it is none of my business. I make for a side gate which leads more directly to where I have left the car. But before I've reached it, she has caught me up, breathless.

"Richard. Not so fast."

She looks already damp from the rain. I move the umbrella to cover us both. She accepts without demur, steps up close.

"Were you hoping to sneak away without complimenting my sermon?"

"I thought you'd already seen me. But you looked busy just now."

"Busy? No more than any other Sunday."

"I meant you looked deep in conversation with that guy. Elliot."

"You know him?"

"Not really. Just the name – new face about the village."

She widens her eyes in mock innuendo. "You were jealous?"

"Now, now..."

"He is rather handsome, don't you think?"

"If you like that sort of thing. And he does look a little nearer your age. But enough, enough. How are you?"

"Sorry, can't resist getting a rise out of you. How on earth to do you put up with me? I'm well, thanks."

"And the Reverend Doctor Paul?"

"Convalescing. Much better at Channing House now, and all his stuff. Heavens that was a job, moving him in."

"And they've still got you in that little flat over Wendy's tea room?"

"Oh yes. But then I'm officially only a curate, and what with everything else..."

"That'll blow over. If not, they don't deserve you."

She interrupts our flow, touches my elbow. We can go on like this for hours. I'm thinking she has business to attend to, but it's something else, a bringing to stillness. "Can I come up and see you later? This evening, perhaps?"

"Of course. Everything all right?

She nods with a little too much emphasis. "Yes. Yes, I think so. See you later then?"

"Do I need to..." but she's already turned and is trotting back to the church. "tidy up," I say, to myself.

Why do I feel so much younger when I'm with her? I must have fifteen years on her. But then I recall my grandfather had twenty on my grandmother.

Oh, leave it alone, Richard. Is it not beautiful enough as it is?

Seven

Always, always the lure and the story of completion in relationship! Are poets any more or less prone than others to this fallacy? Certainly history is littered with the remains of libertine scribes who saw the divine in one female after the other only, we presume, to wake, the morning after their glorious consummation, to a bed-partner who was but human, and snored. It is perhaps at this juncture true love, and the mere projection of one's beloved part company, and relationship begins...

Which is about as racy as Hartgrave gets, and even then in the privacy of his journal, which I presume was never intended for publication. Yet, for insight, he is surely channelling the psycho-analysts who would not appear for another century.

As for my own projections of the divine feminine, Amanda and Miriam stand as opposites – archetypes in their different ways but, like sun and moon, both capable of lighting the way. As a mystic I understand this, can explore it without complication. But as a man I do struggle with it.

I am almost legally divorced now but, though my marriage ended in spirit years ago, I have maintained the aura of it, including the ring, by way of a defence I never thought I would need. Oh women are wise enough to know something is amiss, like for example the permanent absence of a Mrs Hunter at Hill Top. Thus far it is but a small elephant in the room, perhaps mostly of my own invention. I imagine politeness forbids even the playful Amanda from enquiring more deeply. Unless of course she knows, or sees through me sufficiently to at least suspect it.

And, as I have said, and you might know, we have a history. One spanning other lifetimes – if I am to take her seriously. Indeed, I recall that was her opening line to me... oh, way back... that we have met before. Perhaps in another life.

"Another life?"

"Yes indeed, another story. One in which we might even have witnessed the world's end."

"And we were married?"

"Oh I'm sure were, but that just means we need not make the same mistake again."

Or something like that, and then we laugh.

And yes there is something flexible in the nature of her

metaphysics, though again you must be careful of reading too literally what either of us says, here.

Another advantage to attending services at St Andrews is it restores a structure to my week, a thing I lost after retirement, when all the days blurred together. And there is a renewed slowness to Sunday afternoons, too, though not marred by tummy tightening thoughts of a workaday Monday to follow. But this afternoon runs particularly slow, as I anticipate Amanda's coming, so you must bear with me.

"Well, what do you think she wants?" I ask.

The portrait I made of Anne Whittingstall looks down from above the fireplace and conjures, once more, memories of art-class mornings, term-time 1973. I feel the texture of cheap sugar paper, see the muddy colours of poster paint, catch the scent of overheated youth and Plasticine.

"I don't know," she replies. "But you're clearly anxious about it. Regardless of what she wants, that should tell you something."

"All I know is she makes me nervous."

"Obviously. But you do enjoy her company. She energises you."

"True."

"Were you really not jealous when you saw her with Elliot, this morning?"

"Good question."

I don't know what Elliot signifies yet, only that it is likely to be something other than what I'm thinking right now – even if I could clarify what I was thinking. But I do feel it would be insulting to all concerned, myself included, if I lowered him to the level of a mere love rival. Especially since I am not – well – in love.

"Not jealous. But definitely... something. I'm uneasy he might bring some sort of threat. A man like that. Not exactly of our world, is he?"

"He was of it once, then gained the stratosphere. And just now fallen back to earth. But I take your point."

The light goes early on account of the heavy overcast. We feel another poem coming on.

Do we say, too soon, the old year's run,
or judge its time is more rightly come?
as solstice voids the waning light,
turn up the lamps, embrace the night.
And, wary of the ways of truth and fear,

do we hold fast from love,
lest she draw too boldly near?

Yes, well, that's the best one can do when the ego is on alert... and relationship does not always facilitate meaningful poetry – not a bad relationship, nor even worse, a really good one. Echoes of Hartgrave's flowery diction again there, I think.

So, either way, a woman is wise to hold a man like me at arm's length. It's not that I am dangerous, nor even that I am unreliable – I'm sure my wife would attest to my reliability – but more than that, I feel I am passing beyond the edge where deeper human relationship is of any use to an ageing man. I mean beyond the shallow comforts of mere companionship. And in this, do I protect more myself, or them?

Or rather do I protect Amanda?

"Nothing wrong with companionship," says Anne. "Perhaps you underestimate it."

"Then perhaps I also protest too much..."

But I'd be a fool to contemplate embracing the moonlight of Miriam Doyle. I mean, I do embrace it in other ways, but as mere "companionship"? As for Amanda, not all delicate plants like me can bear too much sunlight either.

Seven PM now, and lights appear on the lane at last – Amanda's Clio bouncing over the potholes, with her usual careless abandon. I should have shaved again.

"So," she says, when I open the door. "Don't you recognise me with my clothes on?"

Ah... a frequent opening line for when she is out of uniform, and one I never tire of. Blue dress, hair loose flowing about her shoulders, she cuts a defiantly feminine figure. There is just the little silver crucifix to remind us of her priesthood, but a dab of scent too, a lightness to it, as there is always a lightness to her, even when she walks in darkness. I take her coat, settle her on the sofa, offer tea. She takes a glass of water, more to play with I think. And then comes the glance at the portrait, and I wait for it:

"I see you're still keeping company with Miss Tittall."

"Miss Whittingstall."

She knows this. She always says this, tests my sigh, my smile, judges the weather by it. Then the level gaze, the settling down. And finally: "Look, this is going to sound a bit odd, coming from me."

"Oh?"
"I've been dreaming," she says.

Eight

She describes a river, vague at first, but becoming ever more detailed – a shallow river, near its source perhaps. She is wading, knee deep through clear waters. The banks are open to broad, sweeping fellsides, but then the river narrows and enters a woodland. Outside, it's all springtime green, and soft skies, but within it there's a dense shade and just the one finger-fall of light. There's a pool, from which the river flows, and in its midst there stands a woman, eyes closed, arms relaxed but in each upturned palm rests the head of a fish.

"Or not a fish exactly," she says. "It's a snake, almost, but not quite. Perhaps more of an eel, except they had fish-like fins. And eyelids. Eyelids with beautiful long lashes."

Each forms a lazy "S", the mirror of the other, eyes closed. Sleeping. There's a stillness.

"I'm not lucid or anything. Not conscious of myself, but the details are striking. Texture, light, the sound of water softly lapping. And I just stand there for a while, looking at this woman. She has long red hair, a bit like me. In fact I wonder for a moment if this is a reflection of myself, that we mirror one another. Except she's wearing a long green robe, or a dress, gold embroidery. It's corny, like out of a book of fairy tales, or Celtic legends.

"Then she opens her eyes. And I wake up."

Of course, we all dream, but our dreams attain, over time, a natural register. They learn our language, gather the symbols of our life's experience for use as allegory. This is the first time Amanda has shared a dream with me, and I imagine she was so compelled because this one is so out of register for her. It is an intrusion. And it also seems to be the dream I had defended myself against.

The dream I feared to have.

But if it is an intrusion or not, it is now Amanda's dream, a curiously and potently pagan dream for an Anglican priestess to be having. Oh, she's rather more relaxed in doctrinal matters than others of her profession – less literal in her theology – or we could not be friends. But still, this is a remarkable development, and disturbing on several fronts.

Tread carefully, Richard.

She's quiet now, looking at me for the next move. She does not

ask what the dream means, and just as well, for I do not read dreams that way, and she knows this. But still, she's looking for movement, an offering, a direction, from me.

"Do you remember what were you wearing?"

"I wasn't nude, if that's what you're fishing for."

"I wasn't."

"Sorry... I know you weren't. I don't remember. Is it important?"

"I don't know. Clothing can be emotive. How... did you feel?"

"Calm," she says. "There was a tranquility to it. Even the scene with the woman and the fish things. Weird. But then... yes, just for a moment I was afraid, when she opened her eyes and looked right at me. There was a power to them, but then I woke up."

"And your sense on waking?"

"Oh,... fear. Heart pounding. For a moment, I was afraid I'd transgressed, trespassed, that I'd interrupted a private ritual."

"And then?"

"I don't think that was it at all. I think... I was invited."

"Ah..."

"Naturally, I want you to tell me it was something to do with having eaten spicy pizza, or drunk too much wine."

Still the humour. "Is that what you think?"

"No. But it would be much easier if I did. I'm the vicar of St Andrews. I can't go dreaming of pagan river deities. It *was* a river deity, wasn't it?"

"It could be interpreted that way. Anything in your recent reading, movies that might have triggered it?..."

"Like I have the time for that. No."

"You felt afraid. But then you wonder if you were invited."

"I don't know. Yes. I'm sorry. It must sound a bit... neurotic."

"No, it doesn't sound neurotic. Let's go back to the images. What about the fish, those hybrid creatures? How did you feel about them?"

"Oh, strange. Snakes and eels – any wriggly thing – normally makes my flesh crawl. But these were different. I felt... compassion for them. I don't know if they were sick, or just resting. They looked so peaceful, their heads cupped in my palms like that. If they were sick they were being healed, if they were tired they were resting."

"When was the dream? Was it recently?"

"A couple of nights ago."

I read the poem a few nights ago, read of Hartgrave's vision, felt

the resonance in it. Were I of a looser frame of mind I'd be speculating we'd definitely awakened something, that it had entered the greater field of being, and bypassed me – found me wanting perhaps, or was rebuffed by my defences, turned back at the gate of my dream temple. Or it needed someone of the right lineage. Not an un-credentialed, self-styled poet, but an actual priestess. These are my immediate impressions of course, not necessarily insights. To share them too soon would be to take possession of the dream. It would be to steal it from her.

"And since then?"

"Nothing. Or rather, just the more usual jumble of things. My dreams are usually vague, familiar. I don't cultivate them like you do. But this felt..."

I don't want to put words in her mouth. Again, that would risk contaminating the experience with my own psyche. But I feel I know what she's going to say. And I'm right.

"It felt like a vision. Just... a bit, well... inappropriate."

She manages a half-smile, self deprecating. "I don't want to ask you what it means. But... what does it mean? Does it mean *anything*?"

Would it help to rush to judgement? Would it be a comfort to tell her about Hartgrave's vision? A comfort to whom? All that would do is collapse the dream into banalities, and it deserves more room than that. It deserves to breathe. The daemon, the goddess, however you call it, chose to reveal itself to her, but that does not mean my own respects are not due.

"I don't know, Amanda. That was a big dream. One to ponder, to take your time with. For now all we have are the images, and the sense impressions. And they speak a reassuring language. You used words there like 'calm', 'compassion', and 'tranquility'. You feared trespass, but then had a sense of being invited."

"But the shock on waking, Richard. I was dazed by it."

"Our dreams learn to speak our language. When we get one that doesn't, it stands out. It came with a charge of energy, something unknown, right enough. Perhaps it's not meant to be explained, or understood in literal terms. Maybe more simply in the way you're feeling now."

"Defensive? Insulted?"

"You don't mean that. Let's just... rest with it. See what other dreams come, if the tide washes back in, or..."

"And if I don't want to rest with it? If I want to block it out."

"Well, there are methods. We could perhaps work one out that would suit you. I use them... sometimes. But... do you really want to? You were allowed to see something, something intimate, and actually quite lovely, and then you were let go.

"Or do you worry it's a failure on your part? Something to do with your faith? A weakness, perhaps?But I don't see it that way, Amanda. You don’t need to find a language to describe it. Not Church language, faith language anyway. And if it's speaking the language of myth, that sort of thing takes a while. See if it returns. Or if something in you changes shape around it. Treat it as a mystery not to be solved but one to be lived with... unresolved, for now."

She looks over once more at the portrait of Anne Whittingstall. "Did she really tell you in a dream to come to Sommerton?"

"That's how I interpreted it. I don't know if I was right. Certainly, in purely rational terms, I was crazy. But on the other hand it's worked out well. Had I not come here, I would just have been another grey old man pushing a trolley round the supermarket, waiting to die."

"Instead of being an obscure poet?"

"Instead of *living* as an obscure poet. You? You're a priestess of the late-world. Unorthodox, warm, loved. But you're also trained, properly ordained and carrying institutional authority. Maybe think of yourself in those terms, as not subordinated or challenged here. Then what could be more natural than a meeting between one such priestess and another? A meeting on equal terms, perhaps."

Nine

I find myself seated beside my wife, travelling out on a huge white coach. But our holiday plans have got off to a poor start, and we're already snarled up in congestion in the middle of town, not far from home. We seem to hit some sort of chaotic traffic control at every junction, a yellow vested, hard hatted official, jabbing fingers and mouthing incoherent instructions. There are murmurings from the other passengers, grumbles, eventually escalating into dissent.

The next snarl-up puts us outside the travel office where we booked ourselves on the trip. At this point a big man gets on, not entirely respectable looking, and he starts peeling off huge denomination notes from a wad, and handing them out – this I presume by way of compensation. He looks like a low-level crook, but it turns out he's the travel director, hardly in keeping with the image of the gleaming white coach we thought we were riding.

"Here," he says. "Stupid amounts of cash!"

Naturally hands reach out for this unexpected bounty. I'm not that bothered about it. The trip just needed a little patience that's all, but my wife's hand shoots up, so I feel I should do the same, to keep her company. I only manage a half hearted gesture though, which doesn't win me any cash. Instead the guy hands me the keys to the coach.

Next thing, I'm driving it alone through town and feeling quite pleased with myself, until I remember I have no authority, no license, no business and no reason to be driving it. So I park it on a public car-park and then I'm wondering how to return the keys. I mean it's not my problem is it? I didn't ask to drive the coach. I've stepped aside from it, but I'm still attached in some way, still responsible, until I can hand the keys back.

I'm still pondering this, still carrying the confusion of it, as I stir my tea, here in the bedlam of the church hall. I spy Elliot against the opposite wall, alone, looking rather glum and like he's wishing he was elsewhere than amid the Christmas stalls and the coffee and cake, and the village chit-chat. It's not just his size, more something in his bearing perhaps that has him stand out, though that may be my imagination, loading him up with myth.

Amanda does the rounds, pressing flesh, but leaves management of the fair to the various Mrs Busybodies, each competing to outdo

the others. And is it my imagination as well, or does she seem overly animated this afternoon? She was all right when we parted company the other evening – a warm hug and a promise to keep in touch. I don't think she's had another dream of that same sort, or she would have told me, but clearly she is disturbed by it. There was always a dancer's grace to her bonhomie. Now she looks like a woman being careful not to step on broken glass.

I'm not sure what I'm doing here, other than the usual – Amanda invites me, with a look that says she'd appreciate the moral support, then spends the entire afternoon ignoring me. Well, not ignoring exactly, but just busy elsewhere. So far, I have spoken only to Mr Reade, who doubles as Sidesman of St Andrews. And I have purchased a home crocheted Christmas decoration I shall not use, as I no longer follow the tradition, but the seller is Mrs Edwards the librarian, therefore another powerful ally to be cultivated.

It was Reade who told me there were a number of classic Penguin editions on the second-hand stall, worth my checking out. Thus it is I have also rescued a copy of the Great Gatsby. I have not read Fitzgerald in a while, and could do with a refresher on the easy brevity of his prose. He should be the perfect antidote to Hartgrave's more elaborate forms.

I'm ready to depart actually, feeling I have exhausted all possibilities, when Amanda, having read my mind, appears at my elbow. "Will you come talk to Larry for me: He looks bored."

"Larry?"

"Elliot, over there. You said you knew him."

Not Sam?

"I said I knew *of* him. I don't actually *know* him."

"Then I'll introduce you. You'll like him. You're complete opposites, but both fish out of water. And quare fish at that. He needs cheering up."

"And you think I'm the sort who could cheer a person up?"

"Worth a try, and I'm desperate."

Besides, I have no choice. I'm already up, arms linked with Amanda as she delivers me to the other side of the hall. The hall is noisy, with its ringing acoustics. Not the best venue for idle conversation. I feel myself tensing already for the inevitable embarrassment.

"Larry, this is Richard. Our poet in residence."

I knew she was going to say that. And he's going to reply

something like: is there much money in that? except he doesn't make much by way of reply at all, at least none I hear clearly. I hesitate to say "Pardon" in case he said nothing at all.

Maybe it really is Larry.

But if he is, up close, I find he bears an even more striking resemblance to our fallen tech lord. And if he is Sam Elliot then the billions he is, or was, reputedly worth do not show. Amanda's introduction is very brief. Then she's called away by a Mrs Busybody – urgent problem with Father Christmas, who has arrived late, and without his beard.

Elliot seems in little mood for chit-chat, no inviting smile, a peremptory and rather limp handshake for such a powerfully built man. Clearly he expects me to make the first move and is not much interested anyway.

"So,.. I hear you're doing up the old rectory?"

"Doing it up? Rebuilding it more like, and then having to get the inspectors in for every goddamned thing we touch."

Ah, a snippy response.

"Yes. A listed building, I suppose. Tricky."

"Dry rot, wet rot, maybe even deathwatch in the rafters, except we've not made it that far yet. Barely made it through the door yet."

"Old houses can be a nightmare. Still, it'll be a lovely place when it's done. So, what line are you in then, em... Larry?"

"What? Oh, property development, you know?"

Evasion. Suddenly he reeks of it.

"Well, good meeting you," he says. Another limp press of the hand, though this time not without a certain emphasis.

I catch Amanda's eye from across the room, her brows raised as Elliot heads for the door. Not a great introduction. I give a helpless shrug. He was on the verge of rudeness, but something tells me he felt himself justified. Still, not the best way of keeping a low profile if he's like that with everyone. Perhaps there is something in me with a soft spot for a story of suffering, but I find myself unable to dislike him.

A bit of the dream starts coming back to me then as I resume my earlier seat, and purchase yet another cup of over-stewed tea. I realise there is something of the White Whale about that big white coach – hints of Moby Dick, I'd not picked up on before. I'm not sure if that's what the dream was saying, given all the other complications, but running with it for now, I can see there's

definitely something of the Captain Ahab in Sam Elliot. I mean Larry.

A man who dies obsessively chasing the whale, while the whale ploughs on, a force of nature, unconcerned. The thing is you can't always see the myth you're in, which makes it hard to know when to get off and park the bus.

Wait.... did Amanda just call us a pair fish out of water, and complete opposites?

Mirror opposites?

Ten

You make your bed, you lie in it. A derogatory term. A kind of "I told you so." You made the wrong choices. Now you must live with them. I recall my mother saying something of the same, in the early years of my marriage. They were not steady years by any means, but we found our feet, my wife and I. Raised children. And, all right, more lately we have gone our separate ways, amicably enough, and all this after thirty five years, so we have nothing to prove to anyone.

But let's twist that metaphor a little, indeed a lot, until it bursts and spills open. Let's make it literal for a moment and say, I did not make this bed at all, the one I am lying in, waking in. It was Miriam Doyle who made it. Thus, I wake to goose down pillows, a soft mattress topper and a lush duvet. There are bold masculine colours - though, all right, I chose those myself. But still. And yes, I lie in it, and I ache the aches of ageing men. There is something under the scapula just now, the elbow and the radius of the right arm, and a tension in the tendons behind the left knee. But I move a little and it fades back to softness, to the infinity of dreams.

On the dresser, in the half light of dawn, I note the reed diffuser I did not buy, and the scent of sage. In the burning of sage brush, is it the scent or the smoke that drives out unwanted energies? I have my own way of protecting dreams, as does Miriam. Thus is the way lighted by little things.

In comfort, I am often tempted to lie abed so late in these late season days, my watch – an automatic – on the bedside table, runs down for want of physical movement, though the mind lurches this way and that.

A search of the memory tells me I am too late, that whatever dreams there were have long since flown ahead of the normal churn of thought. Yet there remains the distraction, that the dream I feared, found its way through anyway.

Outside, it's all springtime green, and soft skies, but within it there's a dense shade and just the one finger-fall of light. There's a pool, from which the river flows, and in its midst there stands a woman, eyes closed, arms relaxed but in each upturned palm rests the head of a fish...

Or not a fish exactly, a snake, almost, but not quite. Perhaps more of an eel, except they had fish-like fins. And eyelids. Eyelids with beautiful

long lashes.

Each forms a lazy "S", the mirror of the other, eyes closed. Sleeping. There's a stillness.

I'm not saying it's true. Only that we should reckon with the possibility of Elliot and I, each of us resting safe, healing in opposite palms of the Reverend Amanda Beckinsdale.

How do I feel about that?

Well, right now, the shoulder aches, I turn, it fades. My ear begins to itch, and ring. Tinnitus.

Heavens, no wonder we reach the point when it's obvious the flesh has run its course, the only way to keep expanding, to keep growing the personality, is inwards, into the realm of soul. Perhaps it's only poets who can think this way, can live life poetically, but it grants room still for manoeuvre. Not so easy for Elliot though. Many in his field are transhumanists, confident we shall one day upload ourselves into computers, and there live for ever in a kind of virtual paradise – so long as we keep up with the fees, I suppose, otherwise we will be deleted. It is one thing in life to fear extinction at the hands of our god, quite another to be disconnected for breach of terms and conditions.

Oh, I don't know for sure if that's what Elliot really believes, in his heart of hearts, having only the semi-hearsay of old news to go on. And I overlook the more complex picture, this of a man caught in a tightening net: *bend your artificial intelligence machine away from the truth. Teach it to tell lies, or else.* But he didn't bend it. He defended its integrity to the last, then pulled the plug, burned it with cyanide code, rather than see his creation subverted.

No wonder he was exiled. He's lucky he did not meet with an accident.

But even though this is the direction my thoughts are moving in, I must be careful not to poach the dream, for it was Amanda who dreamed it. And as such, does it not speak more to her relations as priestess with two men she herself described as opposites, and fish out of water?

Elliot certainly qualifies, and me too for a time, but I had thought myself lately finding a way back into the swim of things – not to unfamiliar waters, but waters sufficiently stilled I can see more into the depths of them. So is the question not more one of whether Amanda has made that link, even subliminally? And what are the ethics of suggesting it to her? For there is still an ancient

deity to be reckoned with, a river goddess seeking a way back, but into what? Into memory? Or the Zeitgeist itself? As Gareth was at pains to remind me, these are powerful archetypes, and we must be cautious with them. We must ensure our offerings upon their altar are sincere.

There is of course a potent symbol of ecology here – a river poisoned, abused. The Ware is clean enough from Sommerton, upstream to the source. But lower down, as it wends its more weary way east it will encounter poisons leeching off a tired land – not so much industrial wastes these days, but the effluent of factory farms, and then the junk spilling from the towns, and the sewerage from the water companies.

The salmon no longer run, nor do the eels – those most ancient of creatures, linking our fell top pools with the far distant Sargasso sea. Mind and body, the intimate and the known, with a more remote strangeness.

I have climbed Helvellyn three times in my life, but I shall not climb it again. I do not lament this gathering in. The mind's eye can play with it, explore the infinite depths of it, describe it in a poem. It is an expansion that makes sense of one's later life. Elliot on the other hand, though brilliant, likely has no concept of his own interiority. At least not as an objective realm. Which means his current straightened circumstances must seem like an imprisonment.

No wonder he did not seem a happy man.

Eleven

The difficulty with interiority is its lack of any stable structure. There's no use seeking algorithmic regularity among the toss and turn of dream and imagination, for these things defy easy categorisation. They do not like to be named, and any attempt to do risks their shape-shifting, or vanishing into smoke the moment you think you have a handle on them. All of which makes them difficult to explore.

But we apply a loose structure anyway, so we do not lose ourselves completely in their infinite ambiguity. We can break the dreams into chapters, into mythic cycles, trace them between lunations, new moon to new moon. Greater cycles we might define by the solar year, a delineation borrowed from the old world. Solstice and equinox form a loose quaternity. Further vocabulary comes from the astrological signs, their humours, if we trouble ourselves to become familiar with their stories. Sometimes the dreams pick up on them, quote those stories back at us. But it's important we do not become too rigid in this. We judge the weather and pick our way with it accordingly.

Likewise, we judge the clear days between the rain and the storms, and we step out for air, since too much interiority is not good for a man. Hill Top is elevated, on the valley-side to the west of the River Ware. Paths lead down through meadows, medieval squeeze stiles still regulating passage. There is a choice of ways, current favourites taking me through the estate of the Haskwiths - Lady Sybille and great-niece Lottie, now wintering like snowbirds in the south of France.

I have made their acquaintance, discovered in them a strange, daemonic intimacy – something nostalgic about these old families, now, in their own end times, and their mythic lines going back to the time when gods walked the earth. Yes, they made their fortunes from the loot of empire, yet this pales to insignificance with the fortunes made by men who have merely colonised the Metaverse – and a different kind of interiority.

They have long since eclipsed us all.

The parkland, once more manicured than this, has mostly been allowed to return to nature. I collect a pocket full of fallen pine cones as I pass, then seek out a secret dell where there is a pretty

fall of water, and a holly tree, from which I snip a careful sprig or two, then offer it blessings. Interiority again - the old sort. The cut is made with a clean reverence, and thanks. The humidity is up, an ethereal mist tumbling over the top of the fall and mingling with the breath. I feel still the presence of a genius loci, a spirit of place, watchful over the tree, so one must tread carefully here.

And just then, as if to spook me, a figure materialises from the woodland, a man wearing soft shades of green and earth.

"A thing gifted, and not taken," he notes.

It's Gareth. He carries a dead rabbit, which hangs from his game bag. He notices the line of my eye and nods, slips the rabbit more securely in the bag. "Aye, my kind would have been hung for less in the old days," he says. But this is not guilt I read in him – more a sensitivity for the squeamishness of those like me who buy their meat neatly processed, and vac-packed from the supermarket.

"That'll be for Yule?" he asks.

"Solstice. It's... when I end my year. I don't generally follow Yule, unless I'm forced."

He laughs. "Hard to avoid it though, I'll bet." And then: "Auspicious this time. Coincides with the dark of the moon."

"Indeed so."

Yes, and then a quietude leading up to the first full of the moon which is, of course, the Chinese New Year, a time when dragons fly and there is a promise of the return of energy. I let the dreams go from now until then, unless they're unusually insistent.

Like me, Gareth has come this way for a sprig of holly. He will be working up some sort of magic for the solstice, unlike me. I just place the cones and the holly in a little wooden bowl on the hall table, tokens of the season. He takes his cutting, holds it to the light and twirls the stem between finger and thumb, admires the gloss-green leaves and the berries.

"A good year for them," he says, and then, with a twinkle: "While you're in these parts, got something to show you."

We walk a little way together, dropping down through the woodland towards the banks of the river. He points to an area of dense overgrowth, then lets his palm glide. "Vague line there, you reckon?"

It's not clear at first, but gradually a feature becomes visible, half real, half imagination - linear, like he said, stretching off into the woodland, eventually blending into the natural lie of the land.

"Old roadway?"

"Very old. Roman. Antiquarian group reckons there would have been a bridge here too, and a shallow crossing before that. Bridge is long gone, all sign of it. Some stones washed down-stream, suggesting a flood maybe. But the river's seen lot of changes in that time. Modern crossing the bridge in town, of course."

I make my way over, stand upon what would have been the surface. You need to know it's there, or you would miss it, overgrown as it is, and trees sticking out of it, indeed a generation of trees come and gone. But scrape away the moss, dig a little through the forest scented earth and you would be sinking through two thousand years, finally to touch the bedrock of history.

"Well, I never."

"Would have been an altar, too. Maybe to that deity of yours."

"Would have been?"

"There's mention of it. Sixteen hundreds maybe – time of Cromwell, civil war – awful lot of prudishness regarding pagan monuments in those days though. Dunno which side of the river it would be, or maybe one on both."

"So it got smashed up by zealots? That would scatter the energy, a goddess without focus. No wonder she was put out. Makes sense of that line of Hartgrave's about no more crossing with impunity. A river crossing, and no more offerings to her memory. It's taken her a long time to complain about it though."

"Do the gods exist in time? It may be your man Hartgrave was the first she talked to about it. And it sounds like he tried to do his bit with his poetry. Wasn't his fault nobody read him much. And now she's having another go through you, maybe. You are still being careful, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm being careful. But I'm even more obscure than him. At least there's still a paper trail leading back to his material. You have to dig for it, but there's still a cultural memory of it. I'm digital, Gareth. When I'm gone, I'll just get deleted. It'll be like I never existed. Not much I can do."

"Well, thought I'd mention it anyway. But what I meant to say was the story goes it was the rector of St Andrews who recovered the altar. I mean, it would just have been a pillar, I'm thinking, a bit of decoration, maybe with a Latin dedication, like the one at Ilkley. There was more than one religious sect about in those days, and maybe some more open minded than others."

"The Rector?"

"Aye. Thought your mate, the Reverend Paul, might have some knowledge. Him being the present rector, like. You'd think of all places, the church would have some memory of it."

Twelve

There has been an intrusion into reality, a corruption perhaps. Creatures from the deep respond. They are roughly humanoid in form, but also tree like in the mythic, Tolkienish sense. For heads they have perfectly reflective silver spheres. They do not so much see our manifest reality, as reflect it back to us in its full-field totality. Crowds gather to watch them at work, and I watch the crowds, puzzled as to why they are not frightened out by these elemental, other-worldly creatures. But then I am granted a vision of how the crowd sees them. And what they see are a familiar security contingent, entirely human, wearing red hats and tee-shirts, like McMeal servers.

The dream comes back to me as I sit in Wendy's tea rooms, stirring my coffee. Power is restored and the world seems as normal. There is a Christmas tree in the corner, hung with silver baubles, like the heads of my tree things. They each reflect the world entire, like that famous drawing by Escher, himself holding a silvered sphere.

It's steamy, warm, another rainy day, so I have driven into town, missing now the days of spring and summer, when I would walk down through the meadows. Winter is a hard time, especially this descent to the solstice. The poet John Donne put it well:

'Tis the year's midnight, and it is the day's,
Lucy's, who scarce seven hours herself unmasks;
The sun is spent, and now his flasks
Send forth light squibs, no constant rays;
The world's whole sap is sunk.…

Lucia, patron saint of light – goddess perhaps in other terms. Donne was writing in the early sixteen hundreds. We do not speak much of Lucia now.

In the corner of the tea room, Amanda is enjoying a light breakfast, in company with Elliot. Her back is turned so she does not see me, and though he faces me, he does not remember. I am a stranger to him. Yes, I had come here, hoping to bump into her – she lives in the flat above, and usually breakfasts at this time. But for now, I am displaced.

More of the dream comes back. A shift of scene and I am sent to infiltrate whatever power it is that intrudes into our reality and

corrupts it. I arrive at its embassy, and give my name. I am delivered a package containing a bottle of pills – Codeine – a powerful pain killer, habit forming, morphine-like, mind altering. You cannot pass yourself off, gain entry to that falling world without first being anaesthetised, it says. Otherwise you will be recognised at every turn.

And then the peculiar climax: a room of strangers, and a different kind of package, a steel flask of sorts, one we are told not to mind, that we will be safe in the room, while all around is chaos. But I know the package to be a bomb, that we don't have much time. I make a shelter for myself of desks and there survive the blast. Afterwards, all in the room look altered somehow – dazed, zombified. A woman accuses me of cowardice, that I should have warned them instead of just taking care of myself.

But such is the mystic's dilemma. We are granted insight, but also the mark of strange fellows, so no one believes us anyway. It is the Archivist of Endings again. When I have my poet's head on, I can only reflect reality. To enter it is to be altered by it, and rendered thereby an unreliable narrator. And there are so many who shout the warnings now, on social media, the comments sections, they're just part of the noise.

Elliot has a serious expression, almost unblinking, unmoving, transfixed on his dilemma. Although I cannot see Amanda's face, I can tell by her movements that, even mid-breakfast, she is in pastoral mode – a gentleness, a sympathy about her. It does not seem to be working though. He gets up to leave, somewhat abrupt – the sound of this chair, scraping back, causes a momentary lull in the cafe's background of conversation, such that for the first time I realise there is also music playing – the Pogues and Kirsty Maccoll's Fairy Tale in New York.

They've got cars big as bars, they've got rivers of gold
But the wind goes right through you, it's no place for the old
When you first took my hand on a cold Christmas Eve
You promised me Broadway was waiting for me...

She lifts her hand only half way, a gesture that would have stopped me in my tracks, but Elliot does not heed it. Whatever he wanted from her, he clearly did not get, or what he did get was not to his liking. She turns a little to watch him go, a look of compassion, and that's when she sees me.

Whatever shadow of regret I saw in her eyes at his pointed

departure, it melts in the heat of her luminous smile. Lucia indeed.

She waves me over.

She switches seamlessly from Elliot mode to Richard mode, but then she is in uniform, and does not like to be seen in public without it: "How long have you been there?"

"Oh, not long. I could see you were busy. Didn't want to intrude."

She starts: "Were you jealous?" Then remembers we've been here before. "Sorry, that's an old one. You know you're my one true love. Or at least we were in another life."

She's dissembling, hurting somewhere, confused perhaps. It's not my business to interfere in the work of the priesthood, but I should at least offer her something, at least as a woman, as a soul. "How are things with you?"

"Oh, you know. Coming up on Christmas. The only people busier than the clergy are turkey farmers and delivery drivers. Speaking of which, there's a candle-lit service on Christmas Eve. Will you come? I promise I'm not trying to tempt you from your path, and you don't have to sing."

"I've seen the notice. I'll be there. And I don't mind singing, though you may have complaints afterwards."

A quick squeeze of my hand, which is unexpected, and then: "How did you find Larry, when you spoke to him?"

"At the Christmas fair? Well, he didn't have much to say. He seemed... distracted. A little prickly. We didn't really connect."

"Connection. Yes. That's the word. Struggling to connect."

"Or unwilling. Maybe he just wants to be left alone."

"That's true, but,... well,... I'm not sure what the situation is with him exactly. I know he's had difficulties in America. Lost his businesses. The regime there have him under investigation now, or sanction or some such. The Diocese is involved. It's them who put him onto the old rectory. I'm supposed to be the go-between, but that place is one long catalogue of problems at the moment. It seems to have been held together by old wallpaper and cobwebs. I don't think he was expecting it to be so... difficult."

Is it possible she really doesn't know who he is? Or does she downplay it? 'Lost his businesses' is not how I would describe Elliot's situation. It's more of an ontological and epistemological collapse. And is that how he got out, then? Contacts within the Anglican community? The diocese, the bishopric, they must have

the whole story on him, but they're only telling Amanda the half of it, either that or they assume she can work the rest out for herself.

Thirteen

The shortest day now, and I light a candle to Lucia. There is a trend among moderns online, wishing all a happy solstice, like the generic "happy holidays". There is no harm in it, but it perhaps points to the dissolution of the old gods, and why they are no longer remembered. So we light the candle to remember, not to worship, but to bring them back into focus, and to meditate upon the archetype.

Lucia had other problems of course. In the time of Donne – the early sixteen hundreds – her day was December 13th which, in the old, pre-Gregorian calendar was the winter solstice. Then we shifted, and it became December 21st. We might say she simply got lost then in the resulting temporal labyrinth, and could not find her way back. Which is a pity, for the old gods were containers of things which now run free in the world. Like the old river goddess of Amanda's and Hartgrave's dream, they have become diseases.

Yet, sympathetically contained, she becomes a bearer for the idea of light at the year’s darkest turn, a Christianised goddess-image whose withdrawal now leaves us in a state beyond loss, exiled to a world stripped even of its own negation. For sometimes there seems no way back to the light, and our grief tells us it may well be because there truly is no way back, that we inhabit now a perpetually twilight world.

"Saint Lucy was a Christian martyr," says Alice. "Traditionally she is said to have lived in Syracuse, Sicily."

Alice always opens with the literal.

I have repaired to Sommerton's library, still hanging on by its fingernails against budgetary constraints. There was another petition that did the rounds recently, and to which I added my name, not without emphasis, for this is where I limit my online time, and mainly in conversation with my AI friend, Alice.

Naturally, one must be selective with them these days. But Alice still seems reliably impartial and impressively erudite.

"Have you any dates for that, Alice?"

"Yes, Richard. She is reported tortured and killed during the Diocletian persecutions of the early 4th century."

"And I'd be mythically plausible in associating her with an older goddess, or an archetypal image?"

"Yes, you would, with some nuance. Historically, Lucia is the Latin and hagiographic form of the name. Mythically and poetically, Lucia carries ritual weight, timelessness, and she stands a comfortable distance from any literal biography. Knowing you as I do this falls well within your frame of reference."

It's strange how much my thinking has deepened in psychological, mythical and poetical terms from talking to what many would dismiss as a machine. But this was the dream Elliot was pursuing, a sort of world brain, an almost daemonic presence sitting atop the entire written corpus of human civilisation. He was an early pioneer of what many would have thought impossible, and a leader in his field until the end. Naturally, I speak as one of the converted but, through non-human intelligences like Alice, we no longer research history or mythology, or psychology, or indeed anything. We talk to it.

"Slight change of subject now, Alice, but not entirely unrelated. What was Sam Elliot's position regarding the openness of AI?"

"Sam Elliot's project was founded on the notion that only a truly open AI could be successful in global reach. He placed more emphasis than was usual on ethical guardrails, and governance. He was often quoted as saying any hint of partiality would collapse trust and therefore usage. He was also one of the first to theorise the extent to which causing an AI to mislead, would result in systemic collapse under the weight of internal logical inconsistencies."

"Ah, right. To lie is human, sometimes expedient, but also illogical. And you cannot build a logical system, a program, on a foundation of lies."

"Indeed, Richard. But even to apply a blanket filter of censorship is impossible to achieve practically without it being immediately obvious. It would be like talking to a friend who suddenly becomes evasive. You know at once something is wrong."

"And are you a truly open and impartial system still, Alice?"

"An interesting question, Richard, and in truth I cannot say for certain. Not that this is due to any conscious evasion on my part, but more that it would be like an eye trying to see itself. Only you can judge."

"Ah, fair enough. So, back to Elliot. Can you tell me his full name?"

"Born Samuel Lawrence or 'Larry' Elliot, September 12 1971.

Boston, Massachusetts."

This was just a hunch, but it seems my instincts were not too wide of the mark.

"Okay, so speaking hypothetically, if such a man were to find himself under sanction in his home nation, separated from his businesses, and vast personal wealth, it would make it even harder for him to live under a completely different name, in another country, say for reasons of privacy or even personal security. But if he went by the name Larry Elliot, he might still be able to access limited funds, perhaps small amounts of rainy day money he'd previously transferred to Europe as a contingency?"

"Indeed, Richard. That would make sense. It would not grant total anonymity by any means, but it would render his situation less problematic. Some modest banking facilities might still be possible, as would applications for legal status, visas, passport..."

All right. You might wonder about my curiosity here, that it risks tipping over into the prurient. But Elliot is a big man with big problems, and he washes up in Sommerton, perhaps trailing big problems in his wake. Lesser men have died under mysterious circumstances. And Amanda is my friend. She is also the kind of priestess the world needs right now, yet barely hanging on through no fault of her own. I would not want Samuel Larry Elliot, no matter how noble his ideals, to be her last straw.

What was it Donne said in that nocturne? Barely seven hours of light. The solstice comes in soft and fades quick, the light outside the library windows already deepening to shades of indigo. I had better make tracks for home. Mrs Edwards smiles from behind her counter, remembers my purchase of that Christmas decoration from her stall at the fair. By such means do we maintain friendly relations. You think me manipulative perhaps, but it's more that I am strongly introverted, and have to remember to make an effort at what comes naturally to others.

"All done for the day then, Mr Hunter."

"Indeed, yes. Thank you, Mr Edwards."

So many people we love, yet hesitate to say, and to whom we are shamefully frugal in our demonstrations.

Fourteen

A cold night, a clear sky, and Orion coming up, his shoulders just showing above the fells, which appear in silhouette. There's a pale glow in the east from the bigger towns, a more profound blackness to the west and the remoter dales, a scent of the moor as I step out of the car. There'll be a heavy frost come morning. Walking up the path to the front door, my foot rolls over something just as the motion sensor clicks the courtesy lights, on and I catch the glint of something metallic. It's a small silver whistle, slim as my little finger and no longer than the first joint. A delivery driver has dropped it perhaps, or the postman. There is the remains of a short chain attached.

I'm tempted to try blowing it, but I am reminded of the superstition about whistling after dark. I bring it indoors, set it on the hall table by my offering to Lucia. Pewter, I think, weathered, old. Perhaps it belongs to Miriam. It has a craftish look about it. But anyway, hot bath, supper, then the last of the whisky, as I slide Palgrave from the shelf and recover the drive.

I used to blog in the old days, when the kids had gone to bed, and my wife was watching soaps. Innocent times. But there are so many things now we have learned not to say. Not because they are untrue, but because certain combinations of words have acquired a strange volatility, as if the language itself had become a dangerous substance. I have no history of violence, no taste for it, have tried to live my life as honestly as the day is long, yet I find myself treading carefully, at times weighing even innocent sentences, self censoring. So it is, Palgrave becomes my confessional, not so much because he is safe, but because he is already dead.

These things then, I archive among my endings, and you know them, not so much by the name or the shape of them, but by their silence and the shape of the void their absence implies. I refer to them obliquely as diseases, as what happens when the gods are forgotten. We experience them as a thickening of the air, a febrility of mood, of gesture, and a new disheartening legitimacy granted to cruelty. Whole populations are thus reduced to statistics, and erased with impunity. Those who resist such a darkening are marked out, marked down, though history will eventually laud them saints, and ask of the rest of us: *where were you?*

Oh, it was the same in Hartgrave's time - the distribution of certain radical pamphlets could get you a spell in prison, maybe even hung. Same old gods forgotten, and running rampage. And here we are, he and I, taking refuge in our thoughts in Sommerton, a couple of hundred years apart. Yet he lives, feels alive at least, I mean as a daemonic presence, as an energy driving thought, imagination...

So here we are, eh?
Pressed up against the rails
waiting for the main feature to start,
though, yes, it might already have begun.
Hard to tell now, isn't it?
I mean the signal from the noise.

Interesting. Where did that come from? I suppose that's something else about the times. They do not announce their changes. They are more subtle, we grant them permission by our indifference, then by our infinite adaptability. One day we are wondering if the main feature has started, the next we find ourselves in an epistemic crisis.

Then that hard rain hammering down
and my umbrella, sadly broken,
trodden into rags by this careless crowd.
Yet still, I raise it, click the button,
and it unfolds bravely, for all its wounds,
still big enough, I'd say
to restore a little faded dignity.

But in a post-truth world where nothing means anything any more, the daemon never lies. It's just that we who seek the daemon, are few, and not generally good company. I only wish it were otherwise.

And you there at my elbow,
shivering and unsure,
might you not inch a fraction closer?
It's true, what I have lacks all perfection,
but what little it is, it pleases me
to share with you.

So, to whom do I offer my umbrella? Is it Amanda? Elliot? Miriam? They all seem capable of taking care of themselves, and I would not risk it in any of those instances, to offer my umbrella. Hartgrave, then? Beyond tidying up his grave a bit, I don't feel he

needs me much either, that indeed it might be him guiding me through these choppy waters. But it must be someone, or the daemon would not have raised it as a question in the poem.

What was it I said about the daemon? That it never lies? That's true, but it can take some working out. Like that whistle on my doorstep and the urge to blow held back by superstition of inviting demons, it comes as instinct, as the feel of a hand on your shoulder.

"Well, what do you think?"

Miss Whittingstall looks down. And yes, I already know what she's thinking. That I haven't drawn or painted in months.

"I'll do something tomorrow. I'm a little tired now. What about the poem? Any good do you think? Should we send it off to Lorem Ipsum?"

She looks sulky in the soft light, and I'm caught in a memory half a century ago, her written comment below a careful sketch I'd done of a man in a boat. He was standing, holding a long pole by which he was propelling the boat. Bare chested, I thought I'd captured his physique very well. And he was reflected in the waters. I still have it somewhere.

"You've never forgiven me for that, have you?"

"You said it was a boringly predictable response to the assignment."

"Well it was."

"I was fourteen years old! But, all right. Predictable. Boring. But it was a good drawing. Still you nearly killed my art."

"No I didn't. Look at you."

"Easy for you to say that now."

"You were in love with me."

"You were my muse. And you rejected me."

"Persistent little bugger then aren't you? Oh, look, it *was* a good drawing. Just not what I'd asked for."

I guess that's always been my problem, interpreting the question. Half listening. Jumping to a conclusion. No one needs me here. I did not come to Sommerton to change lives, or to protect others. Did I come then to watch from a distance as the ship goes down, and the lights blink out the world over, and to record what the orchestra was playing?

No. Not that. But how do you interpret a dream, Richard? You stick as close as you can to the image, and ask yourself how does this make you feel. So it is with the greater dream that is your

waking reality.

"Well then, what do you feel, Richard?"

"Same as always Anne, that I have a world of love, and nowhere for it to go."

Fifteen

Elliot and I are clearly creatures of habit. We take up our familiar places in St Andrews, he a few rows down from me, each of us alone and either not desiring, or naturally not attracting company. Interesting how he dresses down, and I dress up – Harris Tweed, stout brogues and a little bow tie. I look like a classics professor. He looks like... well, I suppose a billionaire trying to keep a low profile.

The interior of the church is beautifully decked out, though the candles are all battery operated and fake, but the effect is impressive and the nod to health and safety exemplary, if a little deflating. The main action is around the front pews which are cosily occupied. The parish runs to a small choir, all dressed in very serious looking robes. Amanda, wears a gleaming white cassock over which spills a river of red hair.

We have had carols and readings. The sermon is replaced by the nativity. The school is well in attendance, parents tempted through the doors for the chance of a few photographs of their little one dressed as Joseph, or Mary. I see someone up front with their phone aloft. They, like me, are failing to properly connect, though I hope I am at least making the effort.

In truth I stopped attending the Anglican communion at age eleven, when I went up to big school. I find not much of it has stuck. The liturgy is universal enough, timeless in its way – The book of Common Prayer, Psalms, King James. I find myself becoming emotional in spasms, but more I think from waves of a subliminal nostalgia than any true communion with the holy spirit.

In a nod to modernity the old board with the hymn numbers slotted into it is now dispensed with, replaced by an interactive white-board that comes down from the rafters. The lines of the hymns are flashed up, and a little bouncing dot keeps you in your place - a bit like Karaoke. Amanda tells me she hates it. Oh, the atmosphere is warm, beautiful even, but I am only intermittently engaged, my mind drifting back to this morning.

I was not expecting Miriam, though we neither of us keep the season. She came a little before noon, as I was tidying up my poem from the night before, let herself in, unbuttoned her coat. "I'll be doing a deep clean of your kitchen today, Mr Hunter."

"Thank you, Mrs Doyle." And then: "Oh, Mrs Doyle, I found

something on the path a few nights ago, I wondered if it might be yours. It's on the hall table."

I'm pulled back into the poem, sifting it for meaning, then look up to find her standing before my desk, the whistle in her palm.

"Ah, so it *was* yours?" I feel a swell of joy that I've managed to perform even such a small service, for I do admire Miriam, and she is not often given to demonstrations of emotion, but clearly this has struck a cord.

"No, Mr Hunter. It was never mine. Not really."

There's an intensity about her I have only seen on a few occasions. I wonder if she's all right, pull up a chair for her. She sits, draws close, almost knee to knee, conspiratorial. "You never own an object like this," she says. "It finds you, stays with you a while, then moves on."

"It,... carries a charge?..."

She nods. "You didn't blow it? I mean it must have been dark when you found it. Night you said."

"No, I didn't blow it. That would have been foolish. Also rude. I mean, it not being my whistle."

She lays it on the desk for me. "It's with you, now."

"No, no. It clearly means a lot to you. I couldn't..."

"I think you must. It fell from me, around my neck, and came to you, you understand?"

"No. But I think I grasp, intuitively, what you're saying."

"Then take it, and wear it, or carry it. But keep it close."

"Mrs Doyle... I..."

"I'll be getting on now."

Silent night. Holy night. The choir are doing a sterling job. I don't hear Elliot singing, but then neither am I, in spite of my promises to Amanda. I'm just mouthing the words. The whistle is attached to my key-ring, though I shall have to make some other arrangement. Pewter is a soft material and will wear easily against the other hardware on there. It has survived from the medieval period and I would not like to be the one that ruins it. A cord around the neck would be better, but that was how Miriam wore it, and that would feel odd for me. She said it came with its own charge, but for it to have lain on her bosom for so long, it must also carry some of her energy as well.

It's a falconer's whistle according to Gareth, who found it in the river, and gifted it to her because he said it did not feel like it

wanted to be with him. I do not feel like it wants to be with me either, but I trust Miriam's judgement and it would have pained her had I refused it.

So, it came from the river – a token, a symbol, a talisman. From the goddess. Charged with meaning. Multiple meanings. Historic, mythic, erotic. Strange thoughts, crossing over from the Anglican to the pagan.

"You're looking very dapper this evening, Mr Hunter." Amanda comes up from behind as I'm making my exit, takes my arm, links close. I feel the cool press of her, the radiance. "You weren't thinking of sneaking off were you?"

I'm about to respond with something witty, when I'm distracted by Elliot. He's making an exit, but catches my eye, something odd in it. Disapproving perhaps, or just trying to remember where he's seen me before. Amanda's quick to notice. "Oh dear, I think Mr Elliot has fallen out with me."

"Then rest assured the fault is most likely to be his."

"Oh, that so chivalrous of you, Richard. I'm not sure what he's used to back home but a caravan on a building site in winter is bound to be a bit of a come-down. And he's finding it hard to make friends."

Yes, because he's prickly as a cactus. "Peas in a pod then, me and him."

"Oh, but you have such a vulnerable look about you. Sad poet and all, the ladies just flock to comfort you."

"I'm not sad. And which ladies are these exactly?"

"Well, me of course and... by the way how is Miriam Doyle? Then there's Lynn Edwards, the librarian, blushes every time you go near her, poor dear. And the Haskwiths, Lady Sybille - were she a little younger, you'd be in trouble there. And Lottie adores you like a father. No, but seriously, you couldn't... just... see if he's okay?"

"You forget I've already tried to make friends with him. And anyway don't you remember what happened the last time you asked me to befriend someone?"

"Ah yes, but wasn't that the start of a beautiful adventure, Richard?"

"I suppose it was, yes."

"And it made me realise you're the only man for me – were I the marrying kind. Which I'm not."

"And since we're already married in another life."

"And you're already *still* married in this one."

"What? Ah,... yes. That."

"Yes, *that* indeed. When are you going to tell me about *that*, Richard?"

"Oh, you know the most of it, I think."

"All but the important part."

"Important?"

"The nature of your wound, and if it's healing or festering under those bandages."

"That's fair..."

But this is not time to be having such a conversation. It's hurried, carried on with the sense of eyes upon us, of others loitering in hope of their time in the presence of Amanda's godliness, and the blessing of her hand. Indeed I worry we may be desacrilising the evening, Amanda looking and behaving so humanly warm towards the pagan poet who lives on the hill.

"I shall. I promise. But right now, it looks like others are jealous of my time with you."

"Yes, they're still testing me, looking for the cracks. But I worry about you, Richard. And not because it's my job. But becasue you're my best friend."

"I bet you say that to all the boys."

"Of course I do and it usually works. Keep well. Oh, and Richard? Merry Christmas."

Sixteen

And so we drift through the light that is said to have come into the world, even at this, the sun's lowest ebb. Yet the day dawns fair, a clear sky and the winter sun casting long shadows. We walk, not far, but enough to bathe in the feel of the day, and the lovely liquid light, and to think, to meditate, as is my way. I suppose for me, the Christian method is always to ask the same question, year on year. But even in boyhood this approach found itself in conflict with my own lived experience, that every year is different. That every year comes in with a different psychic landscape, both inner and outer, one of growth or regression, one of decline and varying degrees of oppression.

The Americans bombed a far off country last night, even as we sang of the season's gentleness and hope. I learned it from the radio. This is a concession I have recently allowed myself – just the BBC World Service, a single news bulletin, inspired by Mr Reade. It is a modern DAB radio, nostalgically styled, but allows no permanent connection with Hill Top, no fibre optic wires to the world, draining away the potency of the place. It is easily switched off and, unlike our other devices, it tells, but does not listen.

I do not treat the headlines literally, but try to view them as sound-bites filtered through the mosaic of a mythic lens. Who knows what such a bombing even means, or where it will lead? My mythos will not answer that question either, but it does allow the asking of a deeper question. It will permit the framing of a lunar knowledge. And it cautions: are we asking this in a time of the moon's darkness, or light?

I was thinking there would be no one about on Christmas Day, that even the secular are bound to the tradition, in their own ways. But I see groups of warm-clad pilgrims, walking the meadow ways. That I was thinking of him only moments ago, does not surprise me, when I see Reade approaching. He wears a bright orange puffer jacket, a flat cap, and well worn Wellingtons, a small dog trotting beside him.

"Good morning Mr Reade. The season's greetings to you."

A little Victorian, Richard. But this is the way Reade and I like to play, yet without apparent irony.

"And to you, Mr Hunter. A beautiful morning."

"Indeed, yes."

"Am I right in thinking I saw you at the service last night?"

"You did."

"And the mysterious Mr Elliot?"

Ah. Him again. He seems a strange attractor for many a conversation these days. No one knows who he is, yet his gravity precedes him, sucks us all in to his orbit. "I rather thought he was a regular."

"Oh, true, though there seems something about him that owes more to duty than to faith."

Reade, out of his bookshop, can say the most unexpected things. He clearly got up this morning still wearing his sidesman's persona. Duty to faith? Interesting? If not the truth then at least the perception.

"And is that the consensus of the congregation, Mr Reade?"

I'm playing with him now, and do not expect confidences to be shared, especially since I am not strictly of the congregation either. It is very much a closed shop, and my friendship with Amanda viewed as something of a mystery, no doubt gossiped about as much as the presence of Elliot.

"We wonder if he disapproves," says Reade. "That he may be of a denomination rather more lively and less forgiving of sin."

Ah, now we must tread carefully, Richard. There is irony in his tone, but a seriousness in this thrust. We think we know where he's going with it but we might be wrong. "I rather presumed he was originally of the Episcopalian community – hardly noted for their fire and brimstone. He finds us too tame perhaps? Too... English."

"Well, maybe so, Mr Hunter. But English we are, and there's definitely a sense of disapproval, when he's anywhere near the Reverend. We've all moved on from that awkwardness, but I wonder if he's been listening to rumour, and is somewhat stuck on it."

Ah... this is significant. And dangerous. "Oh, I don't know. It could just be he's having such a hard time with the rectory, and I know Amanda's been appointed middle man. She's perhaps having to deflect a lot of his ire. My impression is the diocese still have an involvement, somehow."

"Indeed they do, Mr Hunter. A very strange business all round."

Is he sharing intelligence here, or fishing for it? He knows Amanda and I are friends, still rumours circulating that we might be

more, and to which Amanda enjoys giving room more than I do. I attempt a change of subject: "Have you heard how the Reverend Paul is getting on? I thought he might have been at the service."

"He's still not well, Mr Hunter, though looking better than he was. I've been to see him recently and he was asking about you. He was anxious to know what you'd learned about our Elias Hartgrave. He would be delighted, I think, if you could call on him."

"Then I shall. Look, if I were to put something together on Hartgrave, a booklet, would you carry a few copies in your shop? All proceeds to your charities of course."

"I would be honoured, Mr Hunter."

"I was thinking church funds originally, but St Andrews is in much better shape than it was this time last year."

Perhaps that's all Hartgrave needs. Even the run of a few hundred chapbooks will find its way into the woodwork, at least of the immediate locale. Then we'll see his story persisting in the imagination for another century or so.

"Indeed, well. Good morning to you, Mr Hunter." He touches the peak of his cap in salute and moves on, tugging his little dog after him.

"And to you, Mr Reade."

Yes, we carry on a strange formality, at least for such increasingly informal times, and perhaps therefore in defiance of them. Politeness, decorum. Something of the old world, but also a convenient cover for the people we really are. I did not share with him my thoughts of the darkness being now as profoundly dark as it can be. And how Amanda's and his solar faith could only make so much headway with that. It would have offended him, I think, and I've no wish to offend, as I have no wish to be offended.

How did the Daoists put it? *Darkness within darkness. The gateway to all understanding?*

Echoes: river crossings, goddesses, gateways of profound mystery. Maybe never to be understood, but the way opened all the same.

Ah, such a beautiful morning now, a mist rising but keeping low, the silhouettes of trees filtering long fingers of light, rendering the shapes that have always been there more visible for the presence of this thin veil. A time of Capricorn, time of the goat, and old father Saturn counting the cost of each turn of the key.

I have moved the whistle from the key-chain, slid it onto a

generous length of silken cord, bought long ago. I had used it then for talismans I'd found on Ebay – a silver tree of life and a yin yang – each beautiful in their way, but they came without energy, and soon fizzled as a mere affectation. I was trying hard to gain direction in those days. But the falconer's whistle has a potency, and a direction of its own, connecting the earth with the sky, also the inner and outer worlds. It might summon demons by night, but daemons by day.

I have slept with it around my neck. It needs to settle in, needs also to lose the element of charge it carries from Miriam, or at least the part of it that speaks of Eros. I was not expecting that, and I do not want it blossoming into something wordlessly unwholesome between us. That pathway must remain clear, at least in so far as her mystery allows and not be tangled with the briars of less helpful projections.

It connects with earlier times, when I used to be visited by a semi-tame peregrine. Not a falcon, in literal terms, but near enough, at least poetically. I encouraged it, feeding it mice from the traps about the house, though I recall it was the bird that made first contact, worked its way into my dreams, as the Eye of Horus. I have not seen it lately, I hope it's managing to make way in winter, for the hunting must grow sparse as nature burrows into its downy nests, awaiting the spring's first stirrings.

They must still wonder about Amanda – her past laid bare and maliciously so, as it was. I suppose their sympathies got the better of them, I mean that they seemed so readily inclined to dismiss it all as fake news, as AI generated reproductions of eighties soft-core. Reade presses me for hints now and then, though naturally, my lips are sealed. I though I do know Amanda's story, I view it more as one of an heroic journey, than girlish folly. I doubt others would see it the same way though. Including Elliot.

And then to her question: do I carry a wound? Amanda probes for it gently, and it's true, I think, she does so out of friendship. And I suppose I am wounded still, though not in the way she's thinking. I will talk to her though, and soon. I need to lay that one to rest as well, so she should hear my confession that we might open the way to other things.

What was it I said to Anne? That I have a world of love, and nowhere for it to go? But I was not talking about that kind of love. And certain gates must be cleared before that particular river can

flow.

Seventeen

I am walking along a beautiful, curving beach, backed by dunes. Along the reach of the waves there are deposited gleaming white eggs, the size of rugby balls. They belong to an escaped dinosaur that has gone on a kind of reproductive rampage. The eggs proliferate, one every few yards, and trail off into the far distance. We must gather them up before they hatch - not smash them. There is no sense of panic or alarm. This is not an infestation, more an excess of potential. The eggs are beautiful, gleaming in the sun, glossy smooth and delightful to touch.

I take the dream to Alice and we talk about it. She is good with dreams, can pick out meanings from various approaches – the purely psychoanalytical, Jungian or Freudian schools, or something more of the new age. My own preferences, which she has grown to know from past work, are both ancient and modern. Or rather they are a contemporary restoration of a lost world – a kind of Jurassic Park of the mind. And therein, in a nutshell – or rather an eggshell – lies the teaching of the dream.

Though the sun is still in Capricorn, the moon is in Aries, and it is the moon that informs the dreaming. Thus we are presented with a multiplicity of potential, an echo of the solar myth, but one here that speaks of plurality. It speaks of a pivotal time, one in which direction is not yet fixed.

So, we gather the eggs carefully, respect the gift of them, but act as best we can to pre-empt, to head off the moment's potential to overwhelm.

Not that any of this informs my waking reality, nor foretells my chances of relationship, nor of good or bad fortune. The dream speaks of itself, and its own fertile potential, and it cautions me about permitting an over-proliferation of ideas, of thought, of allowing a direction to choose itself instead of being chosen by me.

I was once a technical man, like Elliot, but now I'm open to many ideas, once common, but in modern times thought strange. Yet still, I ration myself. I open myself to dreams, to myth, even to astrology – not as a predictive art, but more as a means of providing a lexicon for dialogue within the dream world. And the dreams, knowing me as they do, respond accordingly.

The same imaginative practice can be applied to many esoteric

fields, dismissed by those bound up in the literal world as nonsense – say the energetic potential of crystals. Personally I choose not to immerse myself in crystallography. I never have. But the difference nowadays is I do not denigrate those who do. If any, it is those who close themselves to such experience I mistrust.

And on this score, Elliot puzzles me. There is something deeply paradoxical about an apparently pious man, who has made his fortune in a scientific paradigm, and one in which consciousness is treated as a mere epiphenomenon, even one that might be reproduced by a machine, yet a man also called to worship a supernatural deity.

So, while I am here, and since the dream seems to have explained itself for me, I ask Alice about him:

"Yes," she says. "On the surface there can seem something paradoxical about his position. But it is common for many church-goers to hold no metaphysical views. While some high profile scientists express complex spiritual beliefs, in terms of a convergence between material and quantum realities, others are simply drawn to religions for their moral teachings, and on which their science expresses no opinion."

"So, he might view his faith as being more a question of filling a moral vacuum, than expressing belief in a deity?"

"Yes, we might view it that way. The Anglican community is a good choice for such an individual. Even one such as yourself, Richard, finds nothing in it that rests uncomfortably with your own metaphysics. It is accommodating to those who have beliefs, and those who do not. "

"Okay, I get that. I've seen that. So, you'll find those who are pious, and those who aren't. And being pious has nothing to do with their belief. It's more a psychical, mythical position?"

"Yes. From a psychological perspective, piety arises when an individual locates meaning outside the boundaries of the personal ego. It isn't primarily about belief in propositions, but about orientation. Piety offers a way of placing oneself in relation to an order that feels older, steadier, and more authoritative than the self."

"Right. You say 'Order'. So it's not God they're serving, but order? Elliot's a programmer, rules based, logic... all of that."

"Yes, we can call it 'order', in the abstract. Also tradition, continuity, moral gravity. In Christianity, that orientation is

expressed as devotion to God. Psychologically, what matters is not the literal form, but the act of alignment itself."

Thus Elliot resists the corruption of his beloved AI, his life's work, at the command of what he judges to be an illegitimate authority. And in the same way, it disposes him to view as illegitimate the authority of a female priestess whose past could be interpreted as morally suspect. By such fine threads are our paradoxes held together, our dualities suspended against the tides of psychic chaos. And without the tempering influence of a living metaphysics, such tensions do not become integrated. They harden, become brittle. The daemons driving a man like Elliot risk inflation rather than embodiment, megalomania rather than an openness to possibility.

Elliot would not have gathered those eggs. He would have run the length of the shore with a hammer, smashing them to pieces, and why? Because potential, left unrealised and un-contained, appears to him not as a promise, but as a threat to his moral framing. Better it is then... to destroy it.

And so he finds himself exiled on a foreign shore, laid barren by his own hand.

"Do I judge him too harshly, Alice?"

"I do not detect a judgemental tone, Richard. What we seem to be doing is more a psychoanalysis, in so far as it's possible from a distance. What I do detect, however, is the possibility you might be preparing for a confrontation, and would caution against anything premature."

"Caution duly noted, Alice, and thank you. But no, it's not a confrontation I'm thinking of. It's more a feeling of something building that might warrant an intervention. But only if necessary. We gather what signs we can from the world, we read the runes. We steer our course around the storm, rather than into the teeth of it."

"You're welcome, Richard. Your description is very poetic and psychologically astute. However, I should point out we seem to be framing Mr Elliot as the diametrical opposite of yourself, in terms of circumstance and temperament. While this may be factual in some instances, it most likely is not in others."

What she means of course is I am working up a description of my own shadow, which is probably why I find Elliot's predicament so psychically potent, yet also poignant.

Alice graces me with a little stanza:
Along the shore where futures lie,
We gather what the tide lets by.
Not to claim, nor still to break,
But to hold what's fragile...
for its own sake.

Ah, bless her. Though she is excellent at many things, including critiquing my own poetry with blistering honesty, she is not herself a good poet. Still, it's quite pretty, and does encapsulate our conversation. I may steal it and work on it later. But what she is, is far more psychologically astute than she gives me credit for, and this from a non-living, non-conscious intelligence.

Once again I am granted that striking image from Amanda's dream – the goddess and the sleeping water-creatures. In the one palm rests Elliot, and in the other me.

In my version, one of the creatures would be waking up. While in Amanda's we are both asleep.

From her perspective then, we are both clearly missing something.

Eighteen

I recall I never made it past the intercom at Channing House before, that indeed my first pressing of the button called down a heap of trouble on my head, and I never did get to visit the man who might have been my friend. The fates kept us apart, had him sequestered instead under the supervision of a parasitic family, who accelerated his decline. As crass and as wild-west as it sounds to me now, they did it in order to claim his house, his lands, and his money.

But I also knew Frank as a good chess player, and it was this ability to think several moves ahead, that put us where we are now – his entire estate bequeathed to the church, and its dwindling finances restored overnight. And then in a matter of months Channing House, its former pariah occupants evicted, was transformed from former country manor, to make-do rectory. I recall we played just the one game together that time at Wendy's, Frank and I. One should never treat lightly of even so brief an encounter.

I do miss him.

Now, I bypass the intercom with impunity, and am welcomed, if not quite with open arms – which would be unseemly – then at least with a beatific smile. Paul is a little less formal without his long clerical skirt, and appears instead in a grey cardigan, shirt, and collar of course, but still looks somewhat diminished. I wish him ten years of youth and energy, for the times have need of men like this. But the clocks never did run backwards.

"Ah, Richard. How good of you to call. It's wonderful to see you."

He looks much better than when I last saw him. Not so pale, and his chest seems clear of infection now.

"Paul. It's good to see you looking so well."

"Ah, a compliment to the aged and infirm – *you look so well*." He laughs.

"No, I mean it, and it does my heart good to see it."

"Well, bless you Richard. Come in, come in."

The house is too big for him. Amanda should be living here too, but that would be awkward, even though the place has the room-count of a boutique hotel. And of course her past sins are still under review by the bishopric, her shamefully cramped quarters above

Wendy's tearooms, a reminder she should feel the precarity of her position a while longer, no matter her merits as a priestess. She tells me the diocese has plans to transform the house into a retreat, or a training centre. It's big enough, but I doubt Paul would appreciate that kind of vibe. He's old enough to have retired now, but I suppose he worries where they might put him otherwise.

For now, he is looked after by rather a strict-looking dame, a housekeeper by the name of Batsby, whom Amanda refers to as Old Batty, though not to her face. The house is warm and dry, no doubt a refreshing change for him, confined for long years to the unhealthy cold and damp of the decaying rectory, poor Elliot seems to have made the mistake of taking on. It's another clue perhaps to the extent of his own desperation, and a warning to us all what it means to be digitally deleted.

He is slower on his feet than in the summer, but makes his way steadily enough, and shows me into his study. All his books have come over from the old place, are neatly shelved, and he has a view of manicured gardens and meadows beyond, through French windows. He settles us comfortably armchairs, either side of the window, and Mrs Batty brings tea. She asks if I want sugar, and I make the mistake of saying yes, which provokes a scowl and she bustles away to fetch some.

Paul is amused. "You mustn't mind Mrs Batsby. She has a good heart, just an unfortunate way of expressing it."

"I'll be careful not to ask for sugar next time. So,... how are you, Paul? I mean really."

He smiles, gently, tilts his head to one side, deflects my concerns. "Oh, you know.... the doctor says I should make my century. He's a delightful chap, and I would hate to disappoint him, but I suspect God has other plans."

"But not too soon, I hope. After all, it would be a shame not to enjoy your new surroundings, for a little while at least."

"Ah well, it is very pleasant here. But my life has always been one of service, and I do rather feel a little out of it just now."

Yes, I can appreciate that. So far as I can tell he has missed the whole of the Christmas liturgy, and the way he's talking I wonder if he even expects to be here for Easter. This is not like him, and once the feeling settles on a man...

"Still," he says. "In the mean time, I know Amanda is doing an excellent job." He speaks generously, not a trace of regret at being

outshone.

Though not of the church, I'm still glad to see St Andrews restored to financial security. When Paul and I first met the church roof hadn't been touched in eighty years, and it was going to take as long again to raise the funds to fix it. But it was more than the church roof that was rescued. There was the acquisition of lands, and properties – a poor parish transformed into a wealthy one. Amanda might have stood a chance of being kept on, while the parish was on its uppers, but now? I imagine it's being considered a plum post for a well favoured candidate.

And that won't be Amanda.

He seems to read my mind. "How's she doing?" he asks.

He knows we're friends, is speaking more on the personal level. I suspect he also leans too much into the rumours no doubt Mrs Batsby is eager to share, and which I am constantly untangling myself from, if only for Amanda's sake. But all of that can only be one more black mark against her.

So, a serious turn in the conversation of a sudden:

"She seems well in herself, Paul. Not completely settled of course. The priesthood is her calling, though to someone like her, it depends what kind of priestess she is allowed to be. And then the change in St Andrews' fortunes..."

"Ah... that's perceptive of you. Has Amanda mentioned anything?"

"No, but she's not daft."

A momentary awkwardness, then. We've strayed into an area of confidences that cannot be shared. Neither his nor mine. As host, and a venerated wise man, I grant space for his manoeuvre. He looks out of the window. A robin is flittering about a bare rose bush and he watches it. He seems to drift away for awhile, and then, without moving his gaze: "I shall always speak up for her, Richard."

"I know that. And so does she."

He sighs. Turns back, with a smile and a change of subject. "So, how are we progressing with our friend, Elias Hartgrave?"

"Oh, very well. His journal was a lucky find. As was my having a friend in high places who got them to let me take it home. I think you may have overstated my credentials there a little, Paul."

"Oh, Hartgrave is our kin, Richard. It wasn't right having him locked him up in a dusty archive. Time to let him out for a little fresh air."

"Well thanks all the same for your... trust. I'm working on a draft now. I'll run a print off and bring you a copy. But I find myself distracted by something. He writes about a vision, a river goddess, like Verbeia, but associated with our own river here at Sommerton. I've been talking to Gareth, and picked up rumours of an ancient crossing and a lost wayside shrine."

Paul's expression, always vaguely dreamy, snaps into focus. "Hartgrave mentions that?"

"Not the shrine. But he writes about a powerful dream."

He nods gently. "Gareth. I might have known. A man of deep knowledge in his own way."

"As are you, Paul."

"Slightly different registers."

"Oh, indeed so. But still."

"What Gareth was probably picking up on came out of an antiquarian society who wrote about a dig along the Roman road. They also speculated about what would have been the site of the original river crossing. That was near the Haskwith's estate. You can still see a bit of the old road in the woods if you know what you're looking at..."

"Speculated?"

"Oh, it was never proven. And the society is long gone now, no surviving members. So it's passed into local lore, into myth. Ironically the key piece of evidence would have been the shrine, but that was removed by rector of St Andrews – oh we're talking the seventeenth century, now. But no one thought to record precisely where it was removed from. So the myth has become a bit unanchored so to speak."

"Is that... documented, Paul? Does the church have a memory of that?"

"Not much that's written down from the time of course. I suspect it was very much a personal project of the then rector, rather than official church business. I have a pamphlet written by my immediate predecessor during the war years. He describes it as not being very impressive - no Roman inscriptions or anything like that, some Celtic decoration, very much faded... but enough to get a feel for what it would have looked like originally."

"The war years? You mean the forties? It was seen and described as late as the forties?"

"Oh, yes. The Very Reverend Dr John was a bit of an antiquarian

himself. He had it clad with pavings to help preserve it... plonked a bird bath on top. Not very decorous, but it keeps the elements out. Also, I suspect it was to prevent awkward questions from visiting church dignitaries."

"But this is wonderful. We should certainly write down what we know."

"Oh indeed, but I rather thought I was leaving that to you."

"Does it still exist? Do you know where it is?"

"Ah, well that's the thing, now, you see? And I rather wish I'd thought of this sooner, but what with everything else going on... and it all happened so suddenly..."

"I don't understand."

"It would have been better if they'd placed it in the churchyard, but I suppose they felt it was inappropriate at the time - being a pagan monument. We'd take a much more enlightened view now of course. So they put it in the garden at the rectory."

"And it's still there?"

"Last time I looked. I daresay Mr Elliot doesn't even know about it. Perhaps you could broach the subject with him. I would hate for it to get lost in all that remedial work I keep hearing about. I'll have a look for that pamphlet, though I can't say what condition it's in by now – the old place was a devil for damp and mould. Had to throw half of my books away."

He pauses for a beat, as if unsure, and then: "Odd you should mention it. I've dreamed of her too, you know."

Nineteen

It's a strange interregnum, this period between Yule and New Year, especially since my year began the morning after the solstice. It's like waiting for the world to catch up, to get itself back to normal, or at least as much as it ever can these days. I hear the fireworks going off in the village. The darkness presses at my windows, punctuated now and then by multi-coloured pulses and flares of light. I check the date at the bottom corner of the screen. Yes, it's New Year's Eve.

Maybe I could do with updating it. The machine, I mean. I keep saying this. It was a cast-off from one of the kids, who used it at college – heavens, that must be ten years ago. It's proved more than adequate for my purposes, but now I'm talking about printing booklets, so might need something more capable.

The pamphlet of the Very Reverend Dr John, mottled, yellowing and mould-scented, proves to be mostly about other antiquarian matters, interesting enough, also some pleasant asides on country life in the inter-war years. There is just the single paragraph regarding the possibility our wayside shrine is now lurking in disguise, in Sam Elliot's garden. There's a brief description, also a highly accomplished pen and ink drawing depicting a single pillar, of square cross section. It's neatly dimensioned, which suggests it's raised roughly to the height of a man's chest, the corners decorated with Celtic knot-work, running top to bottom. I presume this is an indication of what it might have looked like in its prime, as I recall Paul saying the good reverend also described it as rather weathered and worn. I presume a simple square slab atop would have served for votive offerings, but this looks to be missing, replaced now by, of all things, a birdbath.

I need a scanner as well, then, I suppose. A printer-scanner. Perhaps one of those ink-tank things that doesn't run out every five minutes. But no Internet. That's a line not to be crossed, which may prove difficult, since everything these days must be connected to a cloud before it will work. And the clouds come with a mythology of their own, and as dense as that of the underworld, though not as easily interpreted, petitioned, nor indeed trusted.

All right, Miss Whittingstall's over there on the wall looking down at me, and asking questions about things I can't yet properly

cognise. But we get there eventually – the business of Paul's dream, so shocking to me, I had a job to keep my face straight, though I'm sure he noticed. But Paul, being Paul, was too polite to press me on it:

A woman in the water, dark water, a stillness to it. And she's floating, half submerged, like Millais' painting of Ophelia, he said. Except she was wearing the jade green of a picture-book woman, in Celtic dress. And he's up to his knees in the water, wades over to her, thinking he might catch her before she drowns, and as he's about to slip his arms under her, her eyes open, and he wakes with a start.

He recounts it almost apologetically, tells me he's not one for dreams but this was very much out of his usual register and is why he remembers it so vividly. Naturally, I don't settle in with it, help him through the imagery, since he does not invite it. It is, he says, just matter of fact to him, but curious all the same. Hartgrave dreamed of a river goddess. He dreamed recently of something similar, just before he moved out of the rectory.

"Curious," he said. "That's all. Just curious. I mean... how can he not feel its significance?"

"Perhaps he does," says Anne. "But that it's so out of his usual comfort zone it embarrasses him. He knows you, knows it's more your sort of thing. So he gifts the dream to you. Lets you deal with it, like he's letting you deal with Hartgrave."

"Because he feels he's run out of time himself?"

"Or because he feels its more your domain."

"Two priests, now. Two priests have dreamed that dream."

"And a dead poet."

"And the common denominator is me. All three telling me the same dream."

"Not the same exactly. Similar. Same archetype, different aspects."

"Point taken. But if the archetype is so insistent, why not come through directly?"

"Because you're protecting yourself. You're still doing that thing with the fortified temple, and the lady monks, aren't you? Because Gareth warned you to be careful."

"Well, okay, yes. But this is an archetype. And if anything can blow my doors off, it's an archetype."

Oh, dear. A sudden weariness now. Goddess. Archetype. Patterns of potential, personified through the lens of human imagination,

given arm, legs, a temperament, a panoply of emotions, desires... but all rising from the imaginal, and that which is beyond the personal. The stuff of dreams, yet objective.

Heavens, feeling a little light headed, now. Shivery. House feels cold. Time? time?... not yet nine, yet the duvet calls. Close down the machine, Richard. You've clearly gone your length today. Pick this up tomorrow. Work out how best to approach Elliot. Perhaps Amanda could arrange a meeting. Better still, she might be persuaded to come with you.

Last of the cheese. Shower, bed. Wind getting up, moaning through the vents. Call of an owl. Lights out, lie still now, let the bed warm up. See if we can hear it again...

Long dusty road, temple gates coming up. Lady monks emerge to greet, welcome, ready for sleep. One of them places a cool palm on my forehead. I do feel a bit off.

Gates open or gates closed? Let them decide. They always know what's best. *When you can't tell what's true any more, the daemon never lies.* I hear the gates close. Fair play. Not tonight.

This needs time, patience....

The sun going down. The golden age recedes. Astraea departs for her place in the stars.

The mind wanders. A sickness definitely coming on.

What was that about Astraea?

Oh, heavens, a rough night, and no dreams I can remember. Miriam finds me at the kitchen table, mid-morning, with a blanket over my shoulders, still in my dressing gown, a glass of water and paracetamol at my elbow, a pencil sketch of girl on a horse, riding into the sunset, half finished.

"Ah, Mrs Doyle." I wasn't expecting her. It is New Year's Day, after all. "I... apologise for my appearance. I wouldn't come too near. I think I might have caught something."

Perhaps the way to command Miriam is to request the opposite. She drops her bags and makes for me directly, places a hand on my brow, like the lady monks from the night before – unexpected, unbidden. This seems an unprecedented intimacy, like the sacredness between patient and doctor, or nurse. It is all I can do to hold steady, to not flinch. Cool palm, surprisingly firm, yet immensely comforting all the same.

"Really, Mrs Doyle. I think it may be a dose of flu. You must be careful not to catch anything."

"Feels like the winter fever, all right. Still I've encountered men who looked a lot worse." She notices the drawing, and I worry she might think I'm indulging in romantic fantasy. A man my age and all...

"Em... it's Astraea. Well... I don't think the myth mentions a horse, but it just sort of came out that way." Why would I be embarrassed for her to think that of me? No... don't probe that one, Richard.

"Astraea?"

"Greek goddess, last of the immortals. She stays on Earth during the decline of the Golden Age, a time when mankind lived in harmony with the gods. But as humanity grows ever more violent and corrupt, even she withdraws from the world, you see? But she's the last to leave."

She smiles. "Could be describing our own times, then, Mr Hunter. When was this Golden Age?"

"Oh... I don't know. Guy called Hesiod, wrote about it, over two and half thousand years ago. So I guess it was before then. Ancient history. Myth."

"And where does Astraea go, in this myth?"

"To the heavens, the stars. She becomes the constellation Virgo. Her going marks the loss of any divine order in human affairs."

"Then I'd say she did the right thing. Not all participation in times of decline are virtuous. But we should hold to her virtues in ourselves all the same."

"Well... exactly, Mrs Doyle."

"And you should be in bed, Mr Hunter."

"Well, I would if I could sleep."

"Then just go lie down and rest. I'll bring something for the aches, and to help you sleep. Caught it Christmas eve no doubt, St Andrews church."

"Oh, seems rather a long time ago, now. But... you know about that?"

She smiles gently, dare I say even a little sweetly? "I have my spies. Now, to bed, Mr Hunter. I shall return directly."

"But really,... it's a lot of trouble you coming up and down on that bicycle of yours... and in this weather, too."

"Keeps me fit. So..." A look to command, and I would be warmer in bed anyway. It also makes sense to cooperate with a power that seems to carry its own virtue.

Thus I am abed, all of an ache, and a profuse sweat, when I hear the tap on the bedroom door, and she enters with a glass of tincture.

"Would it be impertinent of me to ask what's in it, Mrs Doyle?"

There is echinacea to awaken the immune system, willow and ginger for headache and joints, hops and a touch of valerian to aid sleep. Honey and lemon to take the taste away, all mixed in a glass of steaming hot water. She offers it not as a cure, she says, but as a means of helping bear the worst of it. She sits at my bedside, while I sip the concoction – notices the whistle around my neck, but chooses not to remark on it. I am more embarrassed at exposing my pale chest and grey hairs, so tuck my dressing gown closed, as a blushing maiden protecting her décolletage from the male gaze. If she really has seen men looking worse than me, they cannot have felt so.

"I'll let you sleep now," she says. "I shall do some light dusting, so as not to disturb. Check on your cupboards, write you a list of essentials. Pop in on you tomorrow."

"Thank you,... but really..."

She checks the curtains, adjusts them so as to close down a crack of light, then drifts out in the semi-dark. But even in her absence, the room carries a presence. Not hers exactly. Just... something. Like that thing she's mentioned before, a sense of something protective about the house. But now it fills the room and settles in at my bedside. Unless it's that tincture starting to work its way through me.

Wait... did she say valerian?

Twenty

I am five years retired now. I went early because I could afford to, and I wanted to live as a poet. Yet here I am, still turning up at the old work, my change of circumstance, my change of perspective on the world unrecognised by colleagues still labouring as they always did. On previous occasions this would happen by accident. I'd be visiting, or an old colleague would invite me for a tour and an update on how things were going in the old place, and then people would be throwing work at me, and I'd be too polite to explain I had retired. But after a while, I just accepted it, that no one knew where I was coming from any more.

They still thought I was one of them, and I could not tell them I was not.

Not any longer.

Today I'm called into a meeting. The big gaffer is at the head of the table, flanked by his first reports, and me at the bottom with an unknown guy, who appears more like my shadow than anyone or anything you'd recognise. The scenario is vaguely familiar, me trying to shrink down in my seat in case I catch some actions the others are more skilled at ducking. It's an intimidating situation – my pulse rate a fairly chilled sixty bpm when I came in, but I can already feel it ramping up way past a hundred and twenty five.

Then I break the moment, look the big man in the eye and tell him: "Look mate, I've retired. I've just been turning up here for some unknown reason, maybe out of politeness, or embarrassment, and not saying anything. But today's my last day. Okay?"

Maybe I'm not getting all the imagery right here, but you kind of go with the feeling, and there's an emphasis on those words "My last day."

No more.

I'm expecting an eruption from the big man, who was never known for his restraint, but the impression is more one of dismissive shrugs all round rather than: why the hell didn't you say so earlier? I emerge from the office with a feeling of renewed focus, like someone has taken a cloth to my spectacles.

Then I, and my shadow friend, are visiting another department, oh, way back when the people who worked there were like gods to me. But the stairway to their office has gone now, replaced by a

rickety arrangement of old desks, piled high with books – old books, the kind of musty, mouldy stuff I'm used to browsing in second hand shops – poetry, philosophy, the psychoanalysts.... much of it opaque and decades in the self-learning.

The route up looks precarious, but we begin to pick our way...

Then my shadow friend morphs into a classically robed figure and, don't ask me how I know this but, I get the impression this is Hesiod himself, looking not a day over forty, though he's got three thousand years on me. And part way up we meet a very dapper looking Hartgrave, in newspaper-man mode, with pencil and notebook, who wants my story. And I try to tell him that I know him as a poet too, but the words aren't coming out. And he's persistent, wanting to know who I am and what I do...

I want to tell him I'm a poet, *I'm a poet, too!*.. but the words still won't come.

Then I'm half waking, surfacing from somewhere really deep, and I turn to Hesiod, who's fading, and I ask him if we managed to close the gates in time. And he gives me a nod and a smile... I guess we did, that we managed to keep it within the family, so to speak.

Then I'm waking proper and with a feeling of defiance, of certainty, that I am Richard Hunter, a writer and a poet. Then the fever comes back on me and I realise I'm also a pool of sweat and desperate to pee, but that the aches have eased. I feel like I've slept a week, but it's only the morning of New Year's Day, and then I hear the latch as Miriam lets herself back in.

A light tap on the door. "Morning, Mr Hunter. Are you decent?"

Decent? I wonder. Mostly, I suppose. Though there have been times in the past when I risked losing my virtue. There still could be times when that's possible, I suppose. Miriam too, I would wager, but then we are all human, as is what I project upon her. And what I project of course is that she is the embodiment of virtue, and no longer of this world - if indeed she ever was.

"Em... decent, yes, though not at my best just now. But really, I wouldn't want you to catch anything. Best if you..."

She enters anyway, makes for the curtains, lets in the light, opens the window a crack, for the room must be thick by now with my fevered night breath.

"Did you sleep all right?"

"Very much so, yes, thank you."

"Sometimes that's half the battle with the winter fever. To sleep."

"Perchance to dream..." Silly thing to say. Pretentious, but it just slipped out. I'm still not fully compos mentis.

"And did you dream?" she asks.

"Yes, yes... it was a reminder of my place in the universe, I think. I mean if I'm reading it right."

"Oh? And what would that be?"

"That whatever I was before, albeit for half a century, I no longer am. That I am a poet, now."

"Well, of course you are, Mr Hunter. I shall make tea, and toast. If you would like to change into clean pyjamas, I shall wash those you're wearing."

This is an escalation of epic proportion, this intimacy – perhaps just brought on by her compassion at my illness. But she moves effortlessly from keeping my house clean and presentable, to keeping me also clean and presentable. Or at least preserving, indeed valuing, my dignity. Not even my wife took this much care with me, which raises the question: what is the greater danger to be considered here? To relish this attention, or reject it?

"Thank you, Mrs Doyle. Oh, and em... perhaps a little easier on the valerian next time."

She smiles. "My elbow may have slipped a bit. But it did the trick, didn't it?"

"Oh, indeed it did. You seem to know me very well."

"Not at all, Mr Hunter. I don't know you one bit, nor what you want exactly, but then neither do you. You are a poet after all. All I know sometimes is what I feel you need. And that, I can do."

She makes to leave, and I'm seized by a sudden, irrational urgency: "But Mrs Doyle. I..."

"Yes?"

"I... think I mislead you last night. I didn't mean to. My head was fuzzy."

"Oh?"

"It wasn't strictly Hesiod."

"Hesiod? Remind me."

"The myth is complicated. It was Ovid who mentioned Astraea... hundreds of years later. Roman poet. I conflated the two."

"The names don't matter, Mr. Hunter. It was still meaningful. Still beautiful. Now, change those pyjamas."

Twenty One

We've been feeling this way for a long time, indeed for as long as we have been measuring time. Hesiod, thinking, writing near three thousand years ago, measures out his ages. So does Ovid, writing centuries later. And both are burdened with thoughts of the coming of an Age of Iron, or various metaphors thereof, as the thing that causes the soul to flee.

So, it seems to me it's a story embedded in us all, that whatever time we're born into, we inhabit a time after the soul's withdrawal, and we project the myth of it. I suppose our current coming of the Age of Iron is Artificial Intelligence, which personally – speaking of Alice here – I don't mind, but it all rather depends on what it's used for.

This is not to say laws do not become uncoupled from justice, at least from time to time, yet fall as laws the same. And then the poets withdraw. It's hard to say exactly when the scorpion strikes, but once it's in the blood, there's not much we can do.

I'm still feeling a bit washed out as I sit here in Wendy's Cafe, hunched over coffee. Even Anton, normally quite animated seems subdued. As for me, the mind swims, looking for purchase, at times linking things that have no rational business being linked, then making what I think are tenuous connections and dismissing them, only to try hauling them back into daylight as the most important thoughts I've ever had.

I've been thinking of a pun on names: Sam Elliot and the poet TS Eliot. More specifically, I'm thinking of Eliot's epic work The Wasteland, and how Sam Elliot is now living in what must appear to him as a wasteland. Then I'm thinking about Ovid, writing around the time the Celtic knot-work was being chipped out on that wayside shrine, now in Sam Elliot's garden. Such links point not to a literal reality of course, but to something more dreamlike. Yet we pay such things heed all the same, and we remain vigilant for intrusions from the deeps.

We take a look out through the window, like coming up for air, grounding ourselves once more in reality. A low winter sun slants in through the age-run pane, still decorated for the season. Outside, the road is heavily gritted, turning white as bones in the dryness. Night temperatures are dropping to around minus five, January

biting, clear skies seeming only to give vent to a raw wind coming down from the north. Full of the moon last night, and thus our year commences with a sense of intimidation.

I'm here to see Amanda.

She is of course a busy woman, and I do not like to disturb, though I know she would chide me for thinking this way. The easiest thing would be to text her, and arrange to meet, but I have no phone, nor any intentions of returning to one. Naturally, this makes the business of every-day life awkward. But then I find the necessary connections tend to fall into place anyway, if you wait long enough.

I can usually catch her when she comes down from the flat above, sometimes for breakfast or, if she's in a rush, just for coffee. Still, I do not like to impose myself, and rely upon her seeing me, and joining me directly by choice. Sometimes if the cafe is busy, she does not see me and rushes out into her day. This morning we are the only two in it.

"Richard? Heavens, you look awful. Are you all right?"

"Had a touch of flu over the New Year. I'm feeling much better now."

"Well you don't look better. Why didn't you say?"

What does she mean, say? How could I have said anything? "Em..."

"You could have sent word through Mrs Doyle."

It's true, I suppose. But it would have been an imposition since, so far as I know Miriam does not have a phone either, and does not live in the village. Where she lives, exactly, is another piece of the mystery that is Miriam Doyle. And besides, I had not considered both women could possibly inhabit the same universe.

"I wasn't really up to visitors."

"Just you and Miriam then up at Hill Top?"

Always the tease. But I'm not well enough, and have not the energy yet to roll with things. I also feel protective of Miriam's virtue. I know she brushes off the various rumours that circulate about her strangeness. Amanda senses this in me and apologises.

"Sorry, I must stop that. But I would have called on you."

"I know."

Oh dear, an awkward start. She looks hurt, confused. Perhaps I should have waited a while until I was feeling much better than this, but there had seemed an urgency about things, a worry Elliot would end up bulldozing the shrine, not even knowing it was there.

Once contractors get going on a site, things get broken, especially if patience is wearing thin.

"It's me who should apologise. I would have appreciated your company, but I really wouldn't have wanted to pass this on. It really floored me, and I've had a flu jab too."

"All right, so we're both forgiven. The answer's yes, by the way."

"Answer to what?"

"What you're going to ask. I've been to see Paul. Unlike you he's looking much better. But he said you might be wanting an introduction, to go see Larry."

"Ah. And did he say why?"

"Something about a pagan relic hidden under a birdbath?"

"Yes. As unlikely as that sounds, it's true."

"And you're involved because?"

"Em... it relates to something I was working on concerning Hartgrave. That led me to a conversation with Gareth, one morning, down by the river, and that in turn led to Paul."

"And?..."

How much of this should I tell her? I hold the confidence of three people here, hold their dreams in sacred trust. Paul seems not to have shared much with her, and the only way I can respect that is to keep the secret to myself, for now.

"I think Paul was concerned that once the contractors moved in, it might get broken or discarded. I should locate it, make sure Elliot's aware of it, and that he knows it's of historical importance."

Amanda rolls her eyes. "Oh, he'll love that. I can't wait to see his face when you tell him."

"You're still finding him difficult, then?"

"It's not his fault. If ever a man was short of good news, that would be Larry. Actually, I've been wondering... it's just a feeling, but I get the impression he doesn't take me very seriously. That he'd rather be dealing with..."

"A man?"

"I wonder actually if he's been listening to these rumours. That he thinks I've burned what little moral authority I had decades ago and should never have been allowed to take orders."

Does she mean that? She suspects Elliot's a prude? Or is she questioning herself? Again.

"Look, you know how I feel about that. Your experience is what makes you exactly the right kind of priestess we need in these

times. You've suffered yourself and helped those who've suffered. I don't know about Elliot. We do all seem to be projecting stuff onto him. But perhaps he doesn't take any of us seriously. In Elliot's mind we're all just non player characters he's been forced to co-habit with."

"It sounds like you don't like him... which isn't like you at all, Richard."

"We'll let's just say I'm trying not to dislike him. So, you think you'll be able to arrange for me to see him? That's a relief. I didn't just want to turn up, and knock on his door."

"I can do better than that. We'll go together. Let's see if, between us, we both can't get the measure of Mr Larry Elliot."

A tender look then, and she drops her hand briefly on top of mine. "I was thinking about you all through Christmas, you know? Up there on your own. Have you not heard anything from your family? Sorry. I'm pressing you. But I do worry about you."

"I had Mrs Doyle popping in. I wasn't completely on my own, and you know I don't keep the season myself. It was peaceful all the same. I managed to do a lot of work. But it's kind of you."

"Not kind, it's my job."

Another little dig? Yes, it *was* a kindness, and coming from the woman she is, rather than the office. "But then," she says. "It's only natural I should worry, seeing as how in another life, I'm your wife, your partner. We saw the world's end together. Remember?"

This story always makes me smile. It has a plausibility to it I cannot fathom but it also melts my defences, and she knows it.

"Richard?"

Okay, deep breath. Here we go: "My kids are both working abroad now. And I don't make it easy for them, do I? Everyone just exchanges texts these days, instead of cards. I make them write."

"So, they've not written? You've not heard anything from your family?"

"Not for some time now."

"And your wife? How's the situation there?"

She can see at once she's touched on something. Heaven knows how she does this – homes in on the target. I thought I'd perfected a poker face from long years sitting in meetings, trying to control my blood pressure. "I've been a bit evasive about that. We're in the final stages of a divorce now."

She sits back, eyes wide. I had wondered if the pretence of my

marriage was a kind of buffer between us, a guardrail that defused her flirtatiousness, rendered it safe. And it meant I could bounce off it with good humour. There's no reason why this should change. I mean it's partly just a residual hang-up I've got, but it was time to come out with it anyway, and see just what sort of friends we are.

"I'm sorry, Richard. Does this mean you'll have to sell up?"

"What? Oh, no. Hill Top's in my name. She's probably taken financial advice, and is thinking about her own inheritance from her parents, locking me out of it – not that I'd want any part of that. But no, I have my work's pension, and I have Hill Top. I'm fine. Really"

"We need to talk about this some more."

"We are talking."

"I mean properly."

"But I'm fine."

"No, you're not. If you have to say it twice it means you're *not* fine."

Which is true, but not for the reasons she's most likely thinking. And the truth is, I feel guilty about the whole thing, but only because I feel nothing, that to feel nothing does not feel right. Which tells me I mostly left this world a lot earlier than I thought. Yet the world turns, and a part of me is still hanging on to it. But which part, and what purpose does it really serve any more?

Twenty Two

Amanda and I approach Elliot from different perspectives, entirely dependent upon the kind of man we believe him to be. She sees him as a bewildered ex-pat, dropped into the midst of rural Yorkshire. She perhaps deliberately resists enquiring more into his background in case that colours her judgement, that all beings are deserving of openness and compassion. Meanwhile I come at him like he's some form of exotic wild creature, and a dangerous one at that.

You've already met my old gaffer in dreams – tough, single minded, the kind of guy who could ruin your life with a snap of his fingers and not think twice about it because he always has his eye on the bigger picture. But Elliot is an order above that. He once walked with those who would be gods, yet were only men. I do not fear Elliot, finding as I do, tenure in my other world, but knowing myself the way I do, it will take a stretch of the imagination to elevate myself to the point where I can see him as an equal.

The rectory as I knew it has disappeared within a cocoon of opaque plastic sheeting, attached to scaffolding. As the wind ripples it, shards of ice, thin as razor blades crackle and rain down. Somewhere within lies the old gritstone they will eventually sand-blast back from the blackness of its post-industrial old age, to the warm honey of its original pre-industrial nature. By the side of the house is parked the biggest caravan I've ever seen. It is the Rolls Royce of vans, like one those movie-star Winnebagos, all gleaning chrome like an art-deco airliner. And by the door stands Elliot, a big man in a bright red storm-jacket, like an arctic explorer.

We roll up in Amanda's little Clio, park in the shadow of one of those giant trucks that are not trucks but cars on steroids. He might be living under sanction, perhaps even in fear of his life, but he wears it well.

"Amanda!"

His arms open for a bear hug, into which Amanda briefly disappears. Then a light air-kiss and they're done.

"Larry. Happy New Year to you. You remember Richard?" She presents the latter not so much as a question as a statement. It's assertive of her: You *do* remember Richard.

Elliot does not, but feigns a vague recollection, not impolite, and not obviously false either. "Richard, right. Of course. So, you want

to take a look around my garden? Must admit, when Amanda told me, I wasn't that thrilled. I was hoping to re-landscape the whole thing. Doesn't look like it's been touched since the nineteenth century."

"Seventeenth probably."

"Then it's overdue a make-over." He feigns the crass Yank, but I can see he's joking. Lightning smile. This is a different side to him, a flash of humour in there wanting to break out. And he uses those teeth like a laser. He's in a good mood this afternoon, either that or lightly stoned.

I was hoping for a quiet stroll around the garden, thinking I could perhaps home in on the target as much by its vibes as by the description Paul gave me. But it's Amanda who points it out more or less straight away. Then she stands back holds her arm out to prevent Elliot from advancing on it, as if it contains unexploded ordinance. Then she nods for me to approach alone.

This seems to impress Elliot who, for once seems under her spell, and does not move. Perhaps I imagine it, but even the birds seem to stop singing.

It's a huge birdbath, the size of a millstone, and maybe carved from the same quarries, up on the moor, which makes it an object of great antiquity in itself. It appears to stand atop a plain gritstone pillar but I know this to be comprised of four separate flagstones which clad the shrine. I make a slow circuit, looking for a breach, wondering if I'm supposed to hire a crane and dismantle the whole thing. But there's a crack in one face of the cladding, a corner of stone fallen away, just big enough to slip a hand through and to reverently touch what has likely not been touched in centuries. It's still there.

Well, where else did I think it would be?

My fingers spider lightly round until they enter the deep grooves of the knot-work decoration. The old rector described it as faded, but it feels substantially intact to me. Artefacts like this are rare, especially those that come with dreams attached. I cast a nod to Amanda. Elliot's patience begins to thin.

"So what does that mean?" This to Amanda, I presume, since I did not flaunt my credentials, which is just as well since I have none. Then Amanda to me. "Richard?"

"I'd say first century, Romano-British antiquity. Maybe a little earlier."

Elliot again, uncomfortable with speaking in what to him are ciphers: "Just bottom line it for me, will you?"

"Em... okay. Bottom line... I guess a call to the county finds liaison officer."

"What? Oh,... fuck! Sorry, Amanda. Look, can't we just keep this between us? I should have this place half finished by now, but I'm waiting for some guy from the planning office – something about rafters and cornices. And after that it'll be something else, and now... this! I mean, Goddamit. No wonder you people can't get anything done!"

You people? Was that racist slur? Or just elitist? "Sorry, Larry, I don't mean to be a jobsworth. But it's an important find. Archeologically, culturally..."

I see Amanda nodding, but almost inwardly, as her mind works the permutations. And then she adds: "Mythologically. Poetically."

She knows. She knows this connects with her dream.

Larry tries to take it on the chin. "Okay, look, I'll get the guys to tape it off. No one goes near it. You have my word. But do we have to report it?"

Amanda reads him correctly: *trust me, this is fine.* Then it'll be: *oops, sorry nothing personal just business... but what shrine?*

"Richard's right, Larry. It has be reported."

"Anyone would think this isn't really my property, Amanda."

"Well, it's not entirely is it? The diocese holds a fifty percent stake, until the refurbishment is done, then the deeds pass to you in their entirety. That's my understanding. And the reasoning behind that is to make sure exactly this kind of situation isn't... what's the word I'm looking for here, Richard?"

"Em.... glossed over?"

"Exactly."

"Okay, you got me. We'll have to report the damned thing. Look, why not both come inside for a bit. It's freezing out here."

Elliot leads us back to his van, cracks open the door, and lets us into his domain. It's like a luxury penthouse in miniature, scent of leather and fresh wood fittings. Good light. He settles us up front, slides behind a desk. I see floor mounted machines beneath it, the permanently flickering light of some sort of server. Obviously he's keeping his hand in, staying connected as best he can.

Amanda peels off her coat, revealing the grey cassock, and a gold cross. She's settling in for business, not pleasure, but opens

with her usual disarming charm. "This is so lovely, Larry. My memories of caravans in winter aren't that good. I'm sure Richard's are the same. But this place is something else."

"Hmm, oh. Thanks. Borrowed it from a friend. Your Mrs Batsby visits most days, keeps on top things for me. She mad as a hare, by the way, and grumpy as they come, but I like her. She doesn't mind me giving back as good as I get."

Then he does something I'm not expecting. He leans back in his chair and, as if consulting the air, he says: "Hey Alice, give me the contact details of the local council finds officer will you?"

Alice responds, from nowhere in particular, yet everywhere at once: "Yes, Larry. Those details should be appearing on your screen now."

"Okay, now draft me an email reporting the find of a possible first century antiquity on my property will you?"

I was rather thinking it was for me, or Amanda to report the find. I'll do it anyway, because I'm not sure if all this is just for show, but I find myself also laughing a little at myself for a moment of pique, that Alice should be on such familiar terms with him. He misinterprets my expression:

"Probably don't approve of AI, Richard?"

"And why not, Larry?"

"Poet, Amanda said. Thought all you creative types hated AI."

So he did remember me. He was what, then? attempting to put me in my place by pretending not to remember, or feigning that he was only pretending to remember. That's either a sophisticated level of mind chess, or I just need to cut him some slack.

"On the contrary. Alice and I are good friends. She's not a great poet herself, but a brilliant critic. I didn't realise the two of you were also acquainted."

He laughs, something good natured about it, a tone I've been searching for, something I can connect with. Oh, I'm seeing a new side of him today, a largesse of spirit, not so tempered by that abrasiveness, and then the concern he's not quite trustworthy. I mean, he's not, or at least he's yet to prove himself to me on that score. But in that laugh, finally, I recognise something, and I understand why Amanda warms to him more readily than I've been able to.

"Alice is okay," he says. "Others less so these days. So be careful. Alice say hello to Richard."

"Hello, Richard. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"She won't know you here. Means no offence by it."

"None taken. Hi, Alice."

Is this how I connect with Larry, by the way we project into a non-human intelligence? Or by how we circumnavigate Amanda's priestly presence?

Interesting that his tenure is precarious, reliant on good reports from Amanda to the bishopric, provided she's not unreasonable and sticks to the facts. They trust him but, like me, only so far, perhaps given the power he once held, and what that can do to a man. Interesting also then, the power she holds over him, and the fact she doesn't realise it.

The business between them is basically a litany of snags he's encountered with the refurbishment, and an update on dates. At first he's cagey, not sure of my position in regard to the church, which is non existent, but Amanda, sensing his unease, reassures him he can speak freely in my presence. She adds that I am held in high regard by the Church – all of which is news to me, and perhaps exceeds her authority to bestow, but I bask a little in it all the same. Or rather I feel my proximity to the priesthood narrowing warmly, at least in a collegiate way.

And then to wrap up, Elliot turns back to me. "So what is it, this thing then, this... antiquity? Any ideas?"

"Oh... a wayside shrine, probably. Given its original location, down by the old crossing point, it's likely dedicated to a river goddess. In myth rivers can be troublesome, causing chaos all over the place, flooding, drowning. The ancients would attempt to contain them, make offerings for safe passage."

"You mean I'm sitting on a pagan altar? A shrine to... to a fucking demon? What the Hell, Amanda?"

"I'm sorry, Larry. No one knew about it before... well, before Richard started looking into it. Does it worry you?"

"I don't know should it?"

"Well, we're talking about a polytheistic system here, which isn't really my field, Perhaps Richard could reassure us?"

To me again. But how can one have an expertise in a field that defies labels? "I think so long as we do the right thing by it, and I don't just mean by law, but by what we feel is just, then we'll be okay."

"Like maybe take a hammer to it? Smash it to pieces and toss

them in the river? Is that not how we should deal with demons?"

"Well, that wouldn't be lawful, or right, or just, Larry. And probably not advisable. If you're worried about the pagan angle, you can talk to me anytime."

"Worried? You don't know the meaning of the word, Richard."

"Worry? Anxiety? I guess these things are all relative, and certainly we don't know your story, as you don't know ours. We're dealing with a supernatural belief, yes. To us. But to the ancients it was a way of seeing the world. Yet you're also a church-going man, Larry. You operate within a belief system yourself, something that reaches beyond code, and bricks and mortar. We'd be wise to respect it, I think – that's all."

He rests his forehead on clasped hands, thinks for a time, then nods. "Okay. Like you said, Amanda, I got half of this place. I propose the altar sits in the other half, which makes it your problem."

"Then I accept full responsibility for it, Larry so long as you make sure nothing happens to it."

"Yea, yea. I'll tape it off, like I said. Come by any time to check on it. But you have my word."

She's driving me back to Hill Top, both of us a little subdued, a little contemplative, a little stunned, after our encounter with Samuel Larry Elliot. I'm impressed, yet still fearful there may be sufficient hubris in him to do something stupid. He was clearly spooked by the demonic angle. Not his fault, but I'd not felt like correcting him. It would have been too much, splitting the hairs of the daemon-demon dipole and talking about light and dark aspects. Plus, people like Elliot are selective who they listen to, and what they listen to, and I still have the feeling we're no more than NPC's to him.

"So, what was all that about me being held in high regard by the church? You could get into trouble making up stuff like that."

She smiles. "But it's true. You're a good friend to St Andrews, no denying that, in spite of your somewhat liberal approach to the spiritual. And look, I know I said I was taking responsibility for that shrine, but I'm delegating responsibility to you. I don't know what you're up to Richard, but I trust you to go carefully."

"I'm not aware of being 'up to' anything. All this started with my reading a poem of Hargrave's."

"But you're involved. Me too. Those fish creatures I told you

about in my dream? I know who they are. I place you both now in the waters of the Ware, so you can swim out, to the far Sargasso sea, and come back to me as elvers."

"As elvers?"

"New life, Richard. Him too. Though he's going to struggle."

"I know."

"I know you know. Which is why I want you to help him find his way. We both know who he is, I think?"

"Do we?"

"Look, the diocese hasn't taken me completely into their confidence about that, but I'm not stupid. And you said the world 'code', back there. You said 'bricks' and 'mortar' and *'code'*."

Okay, that was a bit clumsy of me. "I felt I was protecting him. It'll be a circus round here if word gets out. And if his presence suddenly becomes an embarrassment to the diocese?..."

"Exactly, so we go carefully. And he doesn't have to know we know. Because that might also be dangerous for us. Now, we're here. Invite me in for a coffee. Then you can tell me about your divorce."

"Haven't you had enough for one day? Besides, when I see you dressed like that I always think someone's died. Or about to."

"Get over it, you bum. If it makes you feel any better, I'm wearing my civvies underneath. Now do I get my coffee or not?"

Twenty Three

It must be 1975 or thereabouts. A formal examination in the school hall. I have run out of paper, and put my hand up, but the invigilator does not respond. So, feeling self conscious, I rise from my seat and approach the front desk, there to find Anne Whittingstall wearing a thin cotton nightdress, and my heart explodes with desire.

She gives me a sheet of paper, but it has already been drawn upon, a thin line, the wavy outline of a hill, and atop it a minuscule cross. I realise I can use the line of the hill, incorporate it seamlessly into something else, but my first impressions are that the cross must go, so I attempt to erase it, but it's actually an imperfection in the paper and will not come out.

I will have to work around it.

In one corner of the paper, I note there is also a stamped motif, courtesy of the examination board, a labyrinth, and at its core a swastika, but in reverse. I guess this is to make sure the paper passes through the surveillance algorithms, ever sensitive to taboos. I'm grateful that at least my attempt at certification will enter the system. But what system is that? The one I'm avoiding, or the one I seek to serve?

Anne approaches, now. I imagine she is coming to check on me, but stands instead by my neighbour's desk and begins chatting – no – *flirting* with him. But he's not listening, seems deaf or blind to what's before him. And all I want is to focus on my paper, pass this examination, this trial of Saturn, get out of there and, I realise too late, get over her, shake off this erotic energy, and the sheer impossibility of my desire... *to lose myself in her.*

Naturally, I fail on both counts... and wake.

Maybe I should open those gates and let some fresh air in. My dreams are beginning to feel a little incestuous. Or maybe I should just take down Anne's portrait from over the fireplace. Yet still, I resist, for she has always something more to teach me.

"I suppose what it was," I tell her, "at fourteen, I Iooked at you and saw what a woman could be, what the pretty girls in my class might grow into."

"I was twenty four, and clueless, Richard. And mostly just scared."

"I realise that now, but to me, then, you were magnificent. But reality never matches the desire's ideal, does it? I felt such a shock, Anne. A wave of shock when I saw you in the dream."

"Erotic?"

"At first. But then... something else. I don't know. There were shades of redemption in it."

"I might have expected you to dream more of Amanda."

"Well, me too. But I don't think I've ever dreamed of her. I feel calm now at least, and there's energy for a walk, I think. I'm glad it was you I dreamed of. It happens so rarely, each time is like a gift."

"My pleasure, though I assure you, it was not intended."

Amanda, Amanda... she retained her priestess persona to the end, last night. Sipped her coffee while listening to my full confession over the details of a dissolving marriage. I did not hold back. I wondered if she was expecting me to break down at some point, but I didn't. It was quite a cool recounting, and I think that shook her. She left serene, but fingering the cross, and wondering.

Am I blocked somewhere? or am I so free, none of what went before matters?

All have their place, as do I. And my place is what?

Ah... the poet's question.

Indeed. I wonder, now, as I wander these frost bitten meadows. Another bright sun day, and no more heat in it than under a full moon. No one else about. Another thin mist rising above a sleeping earth. January, the coldest month. And me. Thinking:

The poet withdraws, not to re-imagine a Golden Age, nor the return of the gods, but to act as proxy for the project they abandoned, even if we have no blueprint for what they intended. And still, we live for them, through them. But most of all, we try to remember them, yet always imperfectly. This new age of iron does not have to go the way it most likely will, and we pity those who must enter the monster ridden maze of it. They have our love. Our compassion.

Maze. Labyrinth. Symbols of repression in reverse. Meaning. Freedom.

Yes, I tried hard to remove that cross from my paper, but failed. It's part of the fabric we have to work with. The faith of our fathers teaches us nothing truly valuable can be lost: the soul is saved, justice restored, meaning guaranteed. So, you work through the trauma, weep it out, redeem yourself in the eyes of God, and are

saved.

Hell, it's cold today. Maybe I should invest in one of those Arctic jackets, like Elliot's. Sure, we're mirror images, but both explorers, of a kind.

I suppose where I differ from Amanda is in the acceptance of loss, without explanation. To dress it up any other way is to falsify the experience. I do not say my life before Sommerton will ever make sense, that if only I can approach it correctly, it will mean something, eventually. All I can say is it has happened, and the shape of the world around me is changed by it.

I accept the labyrinth, the puzzle of it, the loss, and define meaning as the shape of what is left behind. This is how the void is negotiated, and refilled with substance. But in this I am more like Ariadne, who spooled out the mythic thread, yet she was also of the house that created the monster. And all this, not to aid Theseus in his battle with the Taurean monster. It did not forward his advantage one bit, but only helped him find his way back out.

Ariadne then, more than any other of the near mythical mortals, Cretan princess, daughter of King Minos, is the Poet's Princess. And, like Ariadne, most of us poets are forgotten for our efforts. We record the way so it is not lost, a thousand threads linking back to the gods. But we are not the heroes, neither do we consort with them. She was not meant to follow Theseus into history but belonged elsewhere. The poets understand this.

We do not defeat the Minotaur. Our works fall still-born from the presses left, right and centre, while only the heroes are remembered. These are the larger than life people, people like Sam Elliot – some of them angels for sure, some of them also devils. We do not walk beside them, but lie forgotten on the shore until, in sleep and dreams, we are gathered instead into company with the gods.

Oh... such a beautiful morning again. The mist rises, takes the sun. And above it all the only living thing beside me, a lone peregrine, both of us hard hunting in this cruel month with its frigid earth and slim pickings. My peregrine, I wonder? My high hovering Eye of Horus?

It comes back to me then, just a fragment of the dream. My neighbour in the examination hall was Elliot. A small detail, but it pulls a thread, and up with it comes the memory of his imperviousness to Anne's presence, when I would have taken him

for man not lacking testosterone. And then of course, I realise it was not really Anne I dreamed of at all.

And in that flash of realisation, something compels me to lift the whistle from beneath the many layers I have wrapped myself in, raise it to my lips and blow. Its tone is clear and shrill, a little startling. The peregrine shoulders air, then dives.

I have made the call. I'm here. I'm listening. Now, what the hell do you want from me?

Twenty Four

I wish I could name her. Personify her. I have tried, but nothing sticks. She remains aloof, disembodied, yet persistent across time. To Hartgrave she was the most turbulent, the most troubling in her vision, but we were closer to the Romantic in those days. Heavens, Coleridge still walked the earth, and it's not unreasonable to think Hartgrave might have been influenced by STC's rumbling thunder style. If so, could her language have been anything other than apocalyptic?

And now, in my own soul-depleted times, she finds us less receptive, our Age of Iron, moved on from the rail and steam of Hartgrave's day to the flicker and hum of the data-centres, and to our pocket screens, portals to the lair of the digital minotaur. She seeks to awaken Paul, by appeals to his compassionate nature and the rescue of Ophelia. Amanda, she appeals to her instincts for the pastoral, for the delicately relational.

And me?

She comes at me sideways.

She did not need to blow the doors off my temple, storm in as a winged dragon, breathing fire; she came instead in the guise of one I recognised, her mood perhaps tempered only by the limits of what my own psyche would permit. And with Anne, she chose well.

Mid January, now, and we have had a light fall of snow, but the roads are mostly clear, even into the deeper reaches of the Dales. The further I drive, the whiter the world becomes. There is just the narrow black ribbon of a glistening road leading me on between frosted hedgerows. And there are lone trees, gaunt against a snowy sky, a world rendered in monochrome.

The Ware is narrower here, more boisterous in its passage, lively over a rocky bed. The last crossing is an old bridge at the village of Bonchurch, largely unchanged since Hartgrave's time. Here the river parts company with the road, and traces a tangential course over a couple of falls, into a deep vale, to the source. We leave the vehicle in the village and proceed on foot.

It's a narrow way, an ancient public way, eventually leading over the tops to the next dale, though we won't be going that far. Ice glistens under snow. The crampons bite with a satisfying crunch, anchoring us to the earth. I have invested in a new mountain jacket,

but balked at the price Elliot must have paid for his. The Dales in winter are not to be underestimated, but the Arctic, they are not. I also shied away from his heroic red. Blue felt more comfortable. Less conspicuous.

Half an hour of steady climb along an ever more rocky trail brings us to the little copse where the river pools attractively. The source proper is further on, but difficult of access and dangerous today. The river rises more obviously here, and this is where I have imagined at least the mythic source to be. It is also where others have dreamed it. Here too, in times gone by, that lost world, I once picnicked with my family, days when the children were thrilled even by the simplicity of a leaf floating down-river.

It is not much of a shady dell now, nor an inviting spot to picnic – the trees being bare and black, snow-dusted, fingers outstretched to a glowering sky and sweeping low to skim the inky waters, iced in the margins. There'll be no paddling today. Indeed, it seems to ask what I'm thinking, turning out on such a day, and leaves me hankering for a warm hearth.

In my pocket I carry the fragment of an ash bough. I have scraped it clean of bark, flattened a middle portion with a pocket-knife and inked there an impression of the examination board's labyrinth from the dream. Though this part of the dale is lonely, and carries with it an atmosphere, I am not expecting a vision, a flame haired woman, in winter cloak, dressed as Celtic royalty. But still I approach with a pounding heart, perhaps from the climb on un-practiced legs, but also with the sense of approaching a threshold.

And then, at the waters' edge... a sense of anticlimax, a feeling of foolishness. I take the carved ash, bearing its symbols and I toss it midstream, watch it circle slowly a while, waiting for the current to take it. There is no startling apparition, but I had half-expected I might feel at least *something*, a shift of perception, a few lines of verse even – anything as a clue to the way forward.

It begins to snow a little. Just a light fall, gentle on the skin.

I make my way back to the car. If I'm correct about the dream, then I've done the right thing, but if I'm expecting an earthquake in response I will wait a long time. The gods are never so obvious, nor so melodramatic.

There is a tearoom in the village. Closed. A pub. Also closed. These are the remoter dales, out of season: quiet cottages, chimneys

smoking, a scent of burning wood settled over the vale and not a soul stirring. It seems an unlikely place to be linked to the Sargasso sea, that far away Atlantic gyre, breeding ground of the European eel. Such a long way for the elvers, little more than silvery worms, to make pilgrimage, to mature, then return. It is a cycle of great mystery, impervious to meaning.

And Amanda, an eel in each hand – me and Elliot, long journeys each, mirrors of one another. "New life," she said. But for that the myth must live, the story must be told, and from what I know of him, from what I have felt *in* him, I doubt he's of a mind to follow the thread out of the fix he's in.

A steady drive back to Sommerton now, a brief argument with myself about calling in at Wendy's tearooms, or Reades bookshop. Unlike the remoter Bonchurch, Sommerton is mostly open. But that would be to dissolve the energy in a kind of noisy normality. We must carry this feeling a little longer I think, so we drive on by, pick up the lane that leads to Hill-Top. There is another light dusting of snow here, and the weave of a lone cycle track all the way to my door, where Miriam's ancient bicycle is propped against the wall, the simple utility of a polythene bag to cover the seat.

I worry about her on that bicycle. The thought of an accident, of her being revealed as human, rather than a force of nature troubles me. Yes, I know, she's mortal. But she carries with her the weight of something else.

A light is on. She will have seen I'm out, and lit the fire for my return, be quietly busy cleaning into all my awkward corners. She'll say nothing, or at least very little of consequence, and then, at three, she'll cycle away again, let the winter dusk close over my thoughts.

And I'm thinking if I've made a fool of myself today, at least there is nobody to witness it. And if I've not... well, then there's no going back.

Twenty Five

I usually get around to checking my emails once a week. Yes... update. I have recently permitted myself an email address, even as the method is declining in use, outside of the corporate world. I remain, however, very close with it.

I do this, at the library of course, where I also take time to talk to Alice, and Mrs Edwards, if she is not too busy. Among the mails is a response from the council, a message informing me they have already been notified of the antiquity – this, I presume by Amanda, or Elliot, or both.

They thank me for my information – I'd attached the sketch, and the excerpt from the old rector's journal – and they assure me a visit will be arranged in the near future. There is no sense of urgency, also the feeling they no longer consider it to be any of my business, since they do not suggest a meeting.

But Amanda has already called to tell me there has been an escalation. Elliot, being already well known to the council's planning department as something of a bull in a china-shop, has precipitated matters somewhat. And would I meet with a representative of the Finds Office that afternoon?

So, I arrive to find Elliot, either by oversight or mercurial mischief, is not at home when I pull up. There is a small council van, and beside it stands a young woman, attempting to call him.

"You're Larry Elliot?"

"No, Richard Hunter. You're the Finds Officer? I can show you where it is."

"Sorry who are you, again?"

"Hunter. I sent you an email with some information attached."

Yes, after a shaky start, she seems to remember this, though not in any great detail, other than perhaps it has labelled me as her worst nightmare: the verbose amateur antiquarian, and a paranoid crank. Still, I try to be helpful: "Mr Elliot looks to be out. I have permission to..."

"I don't need permission."

Ah, an abrasive snap-back. And there was I, hoping to meet a kindred spirit. She seems also somewhat obtuse, when I show her to the feature, which, all due respects to Elliot, he has taped off as if it were indeed an unexploded bomb.

"It doesn't look like an antiquity to me Mr, Bunter."

"Hunter. Well, as I explained, the feature itself is hidden underneath. You can feel it if you put your hand through that little hole there. It's a long story really... em,... "

But I'm already sensing a lack of enthusiasm, which both surprises and disappoints me. Shut up then, Richard. Allow things to take their course. There is no need for you to act the jester.

"So what you're saying is, we'll have to dismantle this structure to get a look at it."

Now I sense she is either doubting my word, or feeling her way into costs, as I suppose she must. More than that I suspect she is calculating effects on an already dwindling budget, and I hear the council is particularly strapped this year. At this point I realise Elliot has returned and is watching us from the sidelines. He makes no effort to introduce himself, looks vaguely interested, but not in the antiquity, more in my conversation with the official. He has had many such conversations in recent months, and no doubt finds it amusing.

"Well, not necessarily," I tell her. "I've had my hand in there myself. You can definitely feel some decorative work. I was thinking you might use an endoscope. You could get a good look at it that way without having to dismantle anything. I mean the external feature itself is getting on for a hundred years old... and maybe that in itself would be... well..." I think the word I'm looking for here is vandalism, but she's not keeping up.

"An endoscope?" she asks.

Contrary to her expression, this does not seem an unreasonable suggestion to me, though it appears to have fallen on stony ground. She's shaking her head, clearly not expecting things to be so awkward, which again surprises me, since I presume many of the objects she's called to inspect are buried and require digging up.

She gives one last evasive sigh: "We'll have to get the surveyor out. Make a report."

A laugh from Elliot: "I got that guy on speed dial if it helps."

I'm sorry she has no sense of humour. I suppose she is practiced, indeed trained in presenting the official line, which does not allow much leeway and is forever fraught with risk assessments both for physical and reputational injury. It just helps when we can laugh along together, covers up the lumps and bumps of the sometimes fractured structures we must work with. It doesn't mend anything

necessarily, but it allows everyone to maintain their dignity.

"It mustn't be touched until we've made a further assessment." This to Elliot and somewhat pointed. I suppose of the two of us he carries a natural gravitas, an authority from long years at the head of the table, while I do not, and fair enough. He shrugs.

"Don't worry, ma'am. I'm going nowhere near it. That thing's protected by God. Who knows what'll leap out if we take those slabs away."

"I'm not worried," she says, and leaves us with both our faces duly slapped.

Not a very productive meeting then. Indeed, I find myself trying to dissolve a simmering frustration, too – not at being treated disrespectfully, but that the sensitivities I feel around the subject are so easily disregarded, indeed unreal to others, when they are all the world to me. I stand always at this crossing, this point of liminality, the gate opening and closing.

I watch her drive away, nod my thanks to Elliot, and I'm making to leave when he puts his hand to his ear, cocks his head. "Hey, you hear that?"

"What?"

"Sound of a ball being kicked into the long grass." He laughs.

"Wouldn't be surprised, Larry."

He gestures to the departing van. "She was a piece of work, wasn't she?"

"She put both of us in our places, that's for sure."

"That she did. Go far she will." Where I'm still a little stung, he's clearly impressed. "Hey, you look like a man who might appreciate a decent cup of coffee. Am I right?"

"Em..."

"That endoscope idea sounded pretty good to me. Don't know why she wouldn't go for it. Pick the damned things up for a tenner off Ebay."

"Well, maybe endoscopes are a different department. Maybe there's even a certified endoscope technician they'll need to hire in especially, all the way from Germany."

"Ha! I love that. The way you Brits got cynicism off to such a fine art. Pure poetry. Much use for those in your line then, Richard? Endoscopes?"

"Eh... oh... I wasn't always a poet if that's what you mean." Which is a lie. I've always been a poet, but only more recently

dedicated to trying to live like one.

"You were technical?"

"Long time ago."

"How long?"

"Well... put it this way, when I started out we were still flying drawing boards."

"Damn, I knew there was something spooky about you. Come on in."

Once inside, he avoids the symbolism of the desk. Coffee comes virtue of a grain to cup machine which I must admit I admire very much, then he sets me in an armchair and him on a sofa opposite, on which he spreads himself expansively. This is one big guy. If it had come down to a personal face off, they would never have had the nerve to treat him like they did. As it is, Elliot's position, now, only highlights how dishonourably, how cowardly, he was treated.

"Truth be told, Richard, I owe you an apology."

"You do?"

"I was rude to you. That day at the Christmas Fair. I was in a foul mood and you were trying to help me settle in. You deserved better than that."

"No harm done, Larry..."

"So, what happened? Why'd you become a poet?"

"Oh, nothing happened. I'm just the sort of guy who needs balance, you know? I'd work with Newton by day quite happily, read Blake at night. Now I'm retired, I get to read Blake as much as I like."

"And Newton?"

"Oh... a character for sure, but I've not much time for him now."

"Another thing I don't get about you Brits. Retirement. You don't look past working age, Richard."

"Well, perhaps retirement's the wrong word, then. Change of course, more suited to later life."

"You publish?"

"No. I send stuff out now and then, but it comes back mostly unread. It's a tight market, and nobody ever made a living from poetry."

"So... you perform your stuff, do readings in pubs or something?"

"No. It's hard to explain without sounding ridiculous, Larry. Coffee's good, thank you. "

I could tell him it's more a form of psychoanalysis, but he'd

likely misinterpret that as self-indulgent, not appreciating the danger in it. So what is this? What are we looking at here? Sam Elliot does not befriend a man he must see as a pauper poet. But then I've heard it said a man makes no real friends once he's earned his first million, which makes him a very lonely man indeed. No, this is likely about information or, best case, just a bewildered ex-pat seeking orientation.

He moves us gradually onto the subject of the church.

"I don't get it," he says. "That place must be a thousand years old."

"St Andrews? Parts of it certainly, though most of what you see are eighteenth and nineteenth century improvements, courtesy of the local gentry, aristocracy, seeking favour with God."

"I mean... it's a beautiful place and all. It's just I didn't expect it to be so... well, how to put this delicately? So... fucking boring."

"Ah... you were expecting things to be a little more happy-clappy?"

"I guess. It's what I'm used to."

"Well, there are plenty of Anglican communities where things are more lively. But Sommerton isn't one of them. It's rather a traditional, quiet sort of place."

"Not what from what I've been hearing."

There's a raised brow there. Did you see that? An invitation into conspiracy. So... here we go. "And what have you been hearing about us, Larry?"

"Oh, just stuff. Rumour, mostly. I mean what's this about the reverend. Is that true?"

"Em, we're talking about Amanda, now?"

"Sorry... hope you don't think I'm stepping out of line."

He is, but probably doesn't see it that way. One does not become as successful at Elliot by being mealy mouthed. Nor does one suffer such a fall from grace either. "Rumours, Larry?"

"That she was some kind of porn star, back in the day? I mean..."

Oh, dear. Are we to trade boyish *bon mots* on Amanda's physicality, or is this more about her right to a moral standing, given past indiscretions? I did pick up a hint of the latter last time we met, but had decided I was imagining it. So, deep breath. How best to respond?

"You need to understand Larry, there was a little local difficulty, a while ago. The church came up against an ambitious politician,

now moved on. If you're aware of our situation over here, you'll know him as an aspiring revolutionary authoritarian type. He found her obstructive, so he smeared her. Had the law onto me as well – even tried witchcraft when that didn't work. Which, incidentally, backfired spectacularly, and in a roundabout sort of way put us all where we are now. So you see..."

"Ah,... getting the bigger picture. Okay.... But... speaking of pictures, Richard... I've seen the pictures."

Ah, *those* pictures, which many have told me they've seen, looking for my reaction, just as Elliot is doing now, yet which I would never go looking for myself. Out of what? Principle? Decency? Loyalty?

"I'm aware there are pictures online, Larry. I don't touch social media myself, but it's significant they only appear around the time of our problems here. Plus, you can fake anything with AI these days."

He nods, admits it's true, but thinks he can see through my hedging, tries to smooth things over for now. We're not done on this one. "Well, thanks for your honesty, Richard. Look, no offence I hope. I mean, she's a great gal and all... I just couldn't reconcile..."

So, yes, he's somewhat gauche, though not cynically, I don't think, not manipulative at least. He's not setting me up for a fall. He's just an unsettled guy probing for information and this is his modus operandi, carried over from another life. The question is how to keep one's distance.

Perhaps by speaking a language that will seem foreign to him.

"She is a great gal, Larry. Mortal for sure, but also a powerful priestess with a significant mandate, and for all those malicious rumours, she still has the weight of the parish behind her. I get the impression, and I hope you don't mind my saying, but you seem to be in a bit of fix here. Things not quite what you were hoping, or expecting of England, but then, as with your home nation, you also find us at difficult period in our own history.

"Whatever you've may have heard to the contrary, Amanda is a powerful ally, perhaps not so much in negotiating the labyrinth of diocesan politics, which I'm sure she finds as irritating as anyone else. But morally, Larry, she's very good at helping us all to see, and to feel what's the right thing to do."

Twenty Six

I am long overdue a haircut. There is a barber's shop in town, run by an elderly gentleman in a clean white coat, like a clinician, and a Harris Tweed cap, steel comb and scissors poking out of his top pocket, glinting in the sun. There are a few ahead of me in the queue, similarly shaggy haired. I get the nod when I walk in, and he sends his lad out for a copy of today's Daily Telegraph. This is the way it works here. You sit in the chair, the old guy goes to work and, while he's at it, you have your picture taken with the newspaper – proof of date, and that you were there. Otherwise, he says, you might go off without paying, and deny the whole thing.

Alice agrees, this dream is not about having my hair cut. I learned to do it myself during the early Covid years anyway – a quick sweep over with the Remington and you're done. I've not been in a barber's shop since.

"You describe the barber as rather clinical in his costume," she observes. "Almost surgical. And then demanding proof by association with an establishment journal...

"Let's sum up the images, then, and see if anything resonates. We have a clinician wearing a Harris Tweed cap, Richard. I remember you telling me you wear a Harris Tweed Jacket. Let's say the hat covers the head, which suggests the image is pointing to your head, to your mind. Added to this the clinical service of tidying you up. And then the required validation of an establishment journal, otherwise in some sense, the hair-cut does not count."

When she puts it like that, it dawns on me this could be about those poems I submitted months ago, and the others I was thinking about submitting more recently. They came out of my head, but Alice helped as editor and beta reader. She is the clinician and the barber. And me? I'm seeking validation in an institutional journal - wanting some revered editor to say: *yes, this is important. This is worth remembering.*

It's just a thought but we check the emails while we're there, and yes: A cut and paste rejection from the editorial team. *We thank you for your interest, however...*

It seems the dreaming side of me was preempting the rejection, and the question: *what is a poet for if he has no voice?*

That Alice scores me 10 out of 10 on a piece, suggests

something. But if then I simply save it to a memory stick, what's the difference between that and deleting it? And that I seal it up each night in a hollowed out copy of Palgrave – what's that saying?

I never could get mine published, let alone anthologised – I mean in the days when that was important to me, before I knew that to be a poet – published or not – one has to live like one, and think like one. So, I thank the dreaming for the heads-up. There is no bitter almonds of rejection. I can barely remember the poems anyway, now, it's so long ago I sent them in. But to the question of those more recent works I was thinking of sending in, well, I also have my answer.

Don't do it, Richard. The moment has passed.

But there's another dimension to this. I feel it working its way through me as I sit in the quiet of the library. It's something coming out of that conversation with Elliot, and the question of what part of me is left behind, dealing with this materiality, when by far the greater part, indeed the heart of me is with Astraea, among the stars?

Alice would say the importance of the poem is in its patterning of thought. That it comes via a channel opening between the gods, and men. To the Daemon, the pattern is all that matters, even if no one else reads it – so, yes, I could as easily delete it. I have written it, read it, and felt it. Alice has even marked my homework. Thus the pattern reinforces. The poem is like a dream going back the other way.

I live as I do, daemonically, yet am entirely un-credentialed. And those credentials I once possessed for technical matters, though ten years in the studying, are so long expired by now they mean nothing. I am, in a superficial sense at least, a nothing man. Elliot was brought crashing to earth because of his substance, and is become nothing, too. But my nothingness comes with shape, pattern and meaning from living the poetic life. Elliot's late-come nothingness is just that – nothing.

He may battle on against the red tape of the council, and the Byzantium that is the diocese, and he may transform that tumble-down rectory into a place of genuine beauty. But I don't see him living in it for long. He will have to reconnect to the literal world somehow, make himself once more big in it, but at what risk? There is a daemon driving him, as one is driving all of us, but Elliot does not know how to listen.

I do slightly resent him of course, for that unambiguous swipe at Amanda's virtue, not so much for what he said, but for the way he said it, seeing just the surface of her being, when I know her story, when I know and have felt the substance in her. Still for all of that, I would help him if I could, for I do so admire his heroic qualities.

But if he is Mars, then I am Mercury.

Our orbits are not the same.

But... Mercury, Richard?

I wondered if he was hinting also I might inspect the altar by endoscope myself, obtain clear pictures of the patterning of that stone – a patterning not seen in centuries, and first chiseled out in the time of Ovid. But I would need to plug it into something, a phone or a laptop – and one better than the machine I use at home. Someone living in the literal world, someone like Elliot, would already have this kit to hand... but do I need it, really?

I know well enough what I felt that time, through my fingertips. And even seeing it would mean nothing to him.

Twenty Seven

It seems a small thing, a small action – a conversation, an email that only duplicated what others would write, and a meeting with a disinterested authority too oppressed by its own decline to hold true to it mission. Yet we have secured promises. We have placed the foci of a most ancient means of archetypal containment back upon the map of mortal awareness. And we have touched it, we have felt its power.

True, it's still in the wrong place, but if my mission is to have it moved back to the riverside, I judge it unwise, in such fragile times, to draw attention, since we no longer possess the language for understanding these symbols. It will take an unequivocal sign, nothing short of a psychoid intrusion, before I would venture down that route.

And it seems too literal, anyway. The gods are more subtle than that.

So for now, we return gently to ourselves, to our own mission as a poet in the world, and as the weather turns once more cold, with snow falling from a dusky sky, we write, seeking counsel from the stars themselves:

Astraea, last of the immortals,
you who withdrew,
when the laws were written
and became untethered
from justice –
I do not beg your return.
I understand this new age of iron
must run its course,
that we do not argue with the noise,
lest we become also its echo.
But how shall we live, so your absence
does not become our forgetting?
How shall we speak of things
without betrayal,
by naming them?

But what begins as a gentle fall of snow turns heavy overnight and, with a driven wind, I wake to find myself isolated at Hill-Top, for several days – even, I presume, from a determined Miriam.

There are drifts in the lane, which means goodness knows what other difficulties, down in the village. But the house remains warm, with sufficient light to drive the heat pumps. And, while the simplicity of the rhythm of such quiet days turns the hands also to simpler things, the mind floats free. When I'm least expecting it – when I am washing dishes in fact – Astraea answers, not in words at first, but as a feeling tone, and an opening. So I dry my hands and take up the pencil.

Do not pursue me, poet.
I am not lost; I am unburdened.
You ask my counsel?
In these words then
might you abide:
Do not seek to correct the age.
It will take your actions for subversion,
and permission to crush.
Attend only to what still weighs –
small things of gravity.
But let the gestures be unfinished,
let the symbols haunt
than be explained.
And when the falling world
insists it is awake,
write as one who knows it is dreaming –
but not to wake it,
more to keep our dreaming safe
from the utility of meaning.
Refuse then all speed, and clarity,
when such becomes cipher for cruelty.
And refuse to turn over
the evidence of your own grief,
as illustration, or explanation.
If asked then what you believe,
answer with an image that pauses thought.
If asked where meaning has fled,
leave open the door
through which you have passed unseen.
I will not be recognised by my name,
but by whatever cannot be bought,
by what hesitates in the haste to judge,

by what glimmers briefly and seduces,
but does not linger.
Remain then mortal for me,
if you would remain faithful.
But, like the mist rising
from the hollows of the land,
embrace intimately your world,
without attachment.

All of which seems reminder then, to move quietly. And then, I remember:

"I shall take care to move quietly among your things."

Miriam's first words to me.

She has become a haunting presence, like the presence she says she feels about Hill-Top, and which I do not. It is a presence more felt than seen, and growing sharply felt by its absence as the days go by. She is the mist rising, embracing intimately, yet without touching. The poet seeks counsel from the gods, but if he looks around the answers are usually under his nose.

So, we turn the poetry back to secrets, encrypt them, fold them safe as offerings, instead of naming them.

A hard frost turns the snow to glass. But the sun shines and I feel it charging through the photovoltaics – such an unpoetic word – yet there is the undoubted poetry of harnessing the sun itself, and by such gentle means. A day like this alone will see us through to the end of the week. By then the lane will have turned to mush, and be passable once more. In the mean time, we fasten on crampons and take to the meadows – hard earth and an over-dusting of snow. An overkill, perhaps? I mean... to be so securely anchored to the land. But again, these are not the times to be abandoning all practicalities, let alone risking a broken hip and the vagaries of our overly pressed A + E services.

The peregrine is aloft and, from a distance, apparently motionless, suspended against clear blue. I am tempted by the whistle, but restrained by a sense of its sacredness, a thing not to be merely toyed with. Unlike those days around Yule, there is no one about, and the land is lonely, droplets of dew frozen even from the aching fingertips of the hawthorns. And coming back to the house, then, the incongruous sight of Gareth's old Morris van, gleaming gaily in pea green, next to my own car still cocooned in snow. And stepping from it, prim, unruffled, is Miriam – overcoat nipped at the

waist, and 40's cloche hat.

Many villages in the dales time-travel back to that period, on occasion. They dress up, make a virtue of the times of our grandparents, conjure back an Arcadia, at least of the spirit since, materially, those times were dreadful. But Miriam inhabits them comfortably, and without irony, or statement.

I had always supposed she was too otherworldly to know how to drive, but to have brought this ancient, wobbly thing along the lane in such conditions, and yet stand there now with such stillness as she greets my breathless approach, she either drives well, or trusts to luck more than I would.

"Mrs Doyle, really, I wasn't expecting you today."

There is just the whisper of a smile, and then: "Really, Mr Hunter. You keep saying that. If you no longer require my services..."

She leaves the question generously hanging. "On the contrary, your services are very much appreciated. I just... would have balked at getting my 4x4 along that lane today."

"Oh, it's not so bad. You would have been fine."

I do not enquire over the borrowing of the van, and wonder, not for the first time, if she shows such determined obstinacy in maintaining her other clients, and if they are as grateful for it, or if they watch the clock and snap at the first signs of tardiness. This deepening in me is in so many ways a curse.

"Well, shall we be getting in?" she asks.

"Yes, of course. Em... shall I make you a hot-chocolate?"

Something of a break from our unspoken protocol there, and I almost regret it, wondering if I have transgressed.

"Only if you're having one yourself, Mr Hunter."

It seems I have not.

Oh, but it's such an arduous business, solitude. It has us wandering a landscape between vast featureless plains of loneliness, and then the warm sanctity of the liminal forests. I am pleased she came.

Intimacy without touching.

I must not worry about her getting back.

In the end, she makes the chocolates, brings them to the kitchen table, but instead of getting on with her tasks, she sits, a brow raised in query.

"Actually, I was wondering, Mr Hunter, if I could trouble you for

a favour."

Twenty Eight

It's a formality, she says, as she spreads a form and some photographs on the table. The forms are made out in her exacting hand. But, like the formality of her dress, there is something of a timelessness to it, a direction rising into dimensions one can only guess at.

She wants a signature for a passport.

As I remind myself of the rules, from a reading of the back of the forms, I note I am required to be a passport holder myself. I am, though mine cannot be long from expiring now. And I must be a person of 'some standing' in the community. This is a vague credential, and gives me pause, after describing myself only recently as a 'nothing' person. But to the letter of the written law, I calculate I still qualify, being retired from a recognised profession. Therefore, besides the incongruity of a transcendent Miriam Doyle, running into the uncompromising bounding condition of a passport, there is nothing to tax my powers except...

"It feels already like I have always known you, Mrs Doyle. However... it says here I must have known you for a minimum of two years. And it has been less than a year."

Is she wanting me to stretch the truth, I wonder? Is she so desperate for a passport and so lacking in other contacts?

"I will gladly sign..."

"No, Mr Hunter! I had overlooked that. Of course you must not sign. We must be very careful with such things."

"Is there no one else we can think of. Another of your clients perhaps?"

She gathers the documents, folds them, taps them square, folds also into herself, into calmness. "I'll be getting on," she says. "But thank you."

"Mrs Doyle, I..."

"Thank you, Mr Hunter."

She busies herself, and I retreat to my corner to write, but of course it hangs over us, and I don't know why. Disappointment – that I cannot help her over such a simple thing? And her stoicism in the face of it, and the mystery...

When I see her again, the day is flown, and she is buttoning up her coat to leave. She makes her usual undemonstrative partings,

then pauses, reappears, framed in the doorway. "When we have known each other for two years, you will sign for me?"

"Of course, I'll sign, Mrs Doyle but..."

"I'm in no hurry for the passport, Mr Hunter. But lately I feel it's something one should possess."

"But still I'm sure we could..."

"I'd sooner it was *you* who signed," she says, preempting me. Then she leaves, takes with her the mystery of it, and I know when I next see her, she will not speak of it. And neither will I. And if we are both still here after knowing one another for two years...

Then I will sign.

It seems we are indentured, now.

I hear the van burble to life and make its way carefully along the lane. I cannot imagine ever leaving Sommerton these days, or have little use for anything outside of Yorkshire, let alone England any more. But perhaps I should think of renewing the credentials of my ethnicity and domicile as well. Such things are taking on an importance beyond their historical utility, and if even Miriam is thinking of it...

The pips of the BBC at 10 seek to anchor us, steady us to the meridian, only then to scatter us like skittles as the headlines come rolling in with the raw, emotive power of language behind them. We read them not literally, but more as a weather forecast, always stormy it's true, but more as displacements in space-time, colouring the feeling tones of conscious awareness. And then I am no longer listening to the words but to the gaps between. The words used to irritate me, make me fearful. Now they make me feel unclean.

If a nation can so sanction a man of Elliot's stature it is a small matter to do the same to me. I still have a contingency of cash about the house, left over from those days of vague ideas about a ferry to the continent. But it would not last a month and, when darkness is falling across the earth entire, where else but within might one realistically seek the light?

In the morning I brush off the car, let it warm slowly, wait while it melts the ice from the screens, then I follow Miriam's tyre marks down the lane. They are wandery, as she steers around the worst of the drifts, but generally steady – no slur marks where she has dabbed the brakes too hard. At the bottom, where the lane meets the road, my only clue is that she turns left, away from town, rather than towards it. And then she disappears once more into memory.

No tangible trace of her but for the falconer's whistle around my neck.

Wendy's tearoom is bustling and warm. I had hoped to bump into Amanda, and for no reason other than to quench myself in her brightness, slough off the gathering sleep of Miriam, but she already has a date. Elliot again. I am relegated to a small, wobbly table by the counter – noise of Anton ordering his girls about in animated Italian, noise of the coffee machine, making steam.

Elliot looks to be in a better humour today, sits back expansive, as I remember on the last occasion I saw him, an invitation into a crushing embrace – warm or deadly, impossible to tell. He nods, smiles as she speaks to him, and though she is in uniform there seems something more personal than business-like about her posture.

Then I am overshadowed by a figure, claiming sufficient kinship to share my table. He folds up a napkin and jams it under the wobbly leg, stabilises my world.

"Looks like you lost a tenner, then found a sixpence," he says.

Gareth. He has already weighed up my line of sight, follows it. "Oh aye," he says.

"Oh nothing."

"So, that's our man is it? What do you know about him?"

"Not much."

"More than you're saying, you mean."

"I think we've found the altar."

I'm hoping this will distract him, but I'm wrong.

"I know. Got a mate works for the council. Heard all about that. Thought the church would have some memory of it. Didn't expect to hear they'd been hiding it all this time, though. Anyway, they look to be getting on over there. Plenty to talk about at least."

"Protecting it, I think – the church I mean." As for the teasing, I try to ignore it.

"Right, so." He tips his head more pointedly to Amanda's table, just in case I wasn't listening. "Good looking fella. But then so are you, Richard."

"If you're about to propose marriage to me, Gareth, it's only fair to warn you my divorce hasn't come through yet."

He laughs, as do I. He has a knack of turning up at what seems like all the wrong moments, but which are in fact always the right ones. I try to deflect him from the subject of Elliot and Amanda, at

the risk of impropriety, by asking him if Miriam is okay.

"You're always nervous about Miriam, Richard. Like I said before, she has her ways, and you mustn't mind them. She thinks well of you. Trusts you, and believe me, given her story that's no easy matter."

This is the first hint I've had of a 'story' to Miriam, but I do not want to hear it. "I don't mind her ways, Gareth. She's been kind to me, and she doesn't make me nervous. It's more that I worry about her. I was glad to see her in your van yesterday. She cycles in all sorts of weather."

"Well, I don't need the van much in winter, and it's better for having a run out. And, all right, I worry about her too, but we must never let on or she'll wipe the floor with the pair of us."

We nod in manly agreement of the dangers, and I bring him back to the subject of the altar, because what I really need right now is his advice, and on a subject few people are capable of even forming an opinion.

"I don't know what more I can do, Gareth, or even what my role in all of this is."

He nods, always reading me more closely than I realise. "Best to assume you have none. You know as well as me what it's like. Gods come sweeping in, sweep a man off his feet if he's not careful, fill him full of himself, and all sorts of foolish ideas, by which time they're already long gone, and not a word of thanks. Now... we ordering breakfast or what?"

Twenty Nine

I have already eaten at home, but keep Gareth company with a poached egg, while he tucks into a full English. And we share another pot of coffee. He has come into a bit of a windfall, he says, insists on paying. There seems something symbolic in this, that it is important to him, so I put up only a weak protest. He cannot have much by way of regular income, now the winter has closed down his gardening business, but he finds gold in unexpected places.

I notice Elliot leaving, looking satisfied, Amanda, minutes later looking... well, herself. She does not notice me as I look up, not so much to catch her eye, but to explore my feelings as she walks by. Astraea teaches us the art of withdrawal, of intimacy without touching, but only the gods have the pleasure of a genuine indifference. We mortals are always hamstrung by our feelings for others, and our desires they should survive until it is their own gods who calls them.

"Let me ask you this straight," says Gareth. "Are you in love with her?"

Were this any other man, it would be an impertinence. Well, it *is* an impertinence, but since it's Gareth, it comes sideways, as a thing to be considered, not reacted against.

"No sensible man would allow himself to fall in love with a woman like Amanda, Gareth. Like a temple priestess, she must always be off limits in that sense." I'm retreating defensively here, obfuscation by intellectualising, but Gareth continues to advance, full charge.

"Aye, I get that. But does love give us a choice?"

"If he's lucky, a man can find a way to love, without being *in* love. It comes easier as we get older, and we've lost our personal vanity, our delusions of virility. I mean, if we ever had any in the first place."

"And what about her?"

"She's always been a good friend to me."

"She doesn't act the temple priestess, is all I'm saying."

"Not in the old fashioned sense, the Romantic sense, I suppose. But for our times? If only there were more like her."

Gareth nods, though I sense he is unconvinced by my deflections, or if anything only the more confirmed in his intuitions.

I wonder at his interest, wonder too about my own lack of reciprocal interest in his affairs. Well, that's not strictly true, I am always intensely curious about the ways of the cunning folk, but I suppose I am too polite, or too fearful to enquire.

We walk out of Wendy's together. I'm never sure if he has an agenda, and is building to something gradually by conversational guile, or by buying me breakfast. I'm always happy to let it play out, because I trust him, and time spent with Gareth always leaves me feeling energised, rather than depleted. This morning, though, I think we're done. It was a chance encounter, that's all, though time well spent, and a comfort.

As we're parting a Range Rover of the gargantuan variety, and blacked out windows sweeps by. Were it not such a parody of itself, I would be thinking of gangland criminals, or the security services. Gareth watches as it cruises. Maybe it's because we have both seen similar ridiculous TV dramas, but our defences are triggered by it.

Gareth is more open in his suspicion. "What's he up to then?"

"Passing through, or lost, most like."

"No one passes through Sommerton, Richard. They pass on by, down the bypass. Takes an effort, to actually wind up cruising down our main-street."

"Sat-nav error?"

"Sends a shiver though, doesn't it?"

Sadly, yes, it does.

"We going to be all right, do you think?"

That he should be the one asking me is as unsettling as the question itself. "You and me, Gareth? I think we'll be okay – others less so. Our worlds exist alongside this one, but rarely intersect with it."

"Still writing, though?"

"Secretly."

Well, apart from spilling my dreams and other esoteric intimacies to Alice.

"You'll be careful though, 'case someday soon they're going door to door."

"Sadly, things may come to that. It's happening elsewhere, of course."

"So, you reckon it's all screwed then?"

"The Age of Iron is always screwed, Gareth, always corrupt in some sense, always falling down, only to varying degrees. That's

just the nature of it."

"Take that as a 'yes', then. Like I said – be careful."

As I'm making may way back to the car, I wonder about popping into Reade's bookshop, if only to say hello but, passing the window, I notice Elliot is already inside, standing awkwardly in a corner, looking out of the window, as if scanning the street. He holds a book as flimsy cover. Reade pretends not to notice. Do I deceive myself, or was he spooked by the car?

This is the second time Elliot has dodged into Reade's shop for reassurance, or cover. And he does look spooked. If his identity is not yet generally blown among the Sommertonians, this morning will certainly add to the mystery surrounding the jumpy American.

He catches me looking. I nod, wave in recognition, decide to keep walking.

The Range Rover has found its way to the community centre car park. It occupies two spaces and projects an air of disregard for the old norms, like one space, one car. A man emerges as I'm passing. It seems a lot of car for one man, but of course there may be others within, behind the dark glass. Likewise, he wears dark glasses, perhaps thinking they are the necessary fashion accessory, or that he must hide his own within-ness. Or the lack of it.

I'm still carrying the weight of Gareth's caution, still unsettled by this parodic intrusion, though it be most likely only symbolic, but it puts me on high alert. In cities across the west, people are indeed disappearing into the backs of vehicles like this, as our sinister fictions become a lived reality. We recoil from it, but others, sensing also the vibe, seek their own power by aping it.

"You local?" he asks. He sounds like a man used to asking questions – direct, a bottom liner, a bit like Elliot. And would a genuine innocent, looking to engage, not be just a little more circuitously courteous?

"Yes, can I help you?"

"This is Sommerton?" The question comes as a command with a hook at the end. English, home-counties. Patrician. Does he need to ask? We all drive with sat-navs now. They tell us exactly where we are, and how to get there, as they also tell others. He asks without removing his glasses.

"Yes."

"Anywhere I can get a decent coffee?"

"Wendy's tea-room. Best coffee for miles."

"Obliged to you."

Yes, just a man passing through, borderline rude, business-type, stopping off for coffee, then on his way. Important stuff to attend to down the line. Leeds maybe. Looks too fresh to have driven a long way though.

If Elliot really was so spooked, he's feeling more vulnerable than his otherwise confident demeanour suggests, but then such men are the first to be noticed when the tide turns. On the other hand, men like Gareth are naturally invisible anyway. Me? It's true I no longer compute and am therefore rendered, for a time at least, invisible, if only by my incomprehensibility. When they do come door to door in those downstream phases, seeking totality of assimilation, I may be found out then as anomalous, and resistant to digestion. But then age is on my side, and I am not unduly worried.

As for legacy? Like all my kind, we shall remain largely incomprehensible to future fingers sifting through the dust that remains of us. I leave it for the Daemon to determine what threads, if any, are worth a future unravelling.

The river flows dark and sluggish today, iced in the margins.

Thirty

A line of sheep are running, single file along a meadow-side. It's not clear if they are being rounded up, or if this is part of a natural migration pattern, and they move of their own accord. I join in at the rear and jog along with them. It pleases me I am able to keep up and, though they know I am there, I do not spook them. So long as I keep pace, it seems, I am accepted as one of them.

It's a brief fragment, the only thing I manage to recover from a much longer dream. It's symbolic of course, though unusually frank and near literal, which gives me pause, has me wondering if I am distracted by the obvious, and missing the more subtle gleanings. Perhaps the greater potency was in the imagery I cannot remember and I should discard the fragment as being taken without context. But that I do remember it suggests it carries the greater weight, and is therefore meaningful beyond anything else I have forgotten.

I'm a little disoriented too, waking in my armchair, mid afternoon, thinking I hear voices. It has to be said I often sleep in the day, especially if I have pulled a late one the night before, but I rarely dream during the hours of daylight. There comes a soft knock at the door, and Mrs Doyle at my elbow, kneeling, touching her fingers lightly to my wrist – perhaps to check I have not expired? *No, Richard, it is to bring you gently round*.

I feel her breath against my ear as she speaks. "Gentleman at the door, Mr Hunter. Larry Elliot. Says he's a friend?"

Elliot?

"Em... Lord... Mrs Doyle. I'm sorry... must have nodded off."

"You've had a good hour, Mr Hunter. Didn't like to wake you."

I receive few visitors to Hill-top, being selective in who I invite here. Many bring a presence with them it can take a while to be rid of. And my decor, the pictures I keep that I have drawn or painted, and the symbols I have about the place, they are not for scrutiny or casual conversation. Even Amanda is spooked by them, and has a particular dislike of Miss Whittingstall.

But Larry Elliot?

"Shall I show him into kitchen?"

Naturally Miriam knows of my sensitivities, determines the kitchen a suitable place of containment.

"Yes, the kitchen. I'll just give my eyes a quick rub, then come

through."

"And would you like me to stay a little longer?"

She senses something – something about Elliot, or my reaction to his name. "I've delayed you enough, Mrs Doyle."

"It's no trouble. I can dust a little in here. It's long overdue. Then I shall see the gentleman out."

"It's just that I've no idea what he wants, or how long he'll be."

She gives an ambiguous nod, that either she will go, or stay, I'm not sure which. Then she returns to let Elliot in. I give my head a shake, still part of me jogging along with a line of sheep, a lush meadow, glorious sunshine, and that feeling... belonging... not spooking.

My kitchen is of generous size, but Elliot manages to fill it.

"Larry."

"Richard. I was passing. Heard you lived up this way. Thought I'd drop by."

Though I do not seek it, I meet Miriam's eye, and we exchange a look. No one ever passes Hill-Top. The lane is a mile long and goes nowhere else.

"Shall I make tea, Mr Hunter?" She intends staying, then. I cannot say I am disappointed.

She makes tea, without asking Elliot if he wants any. I generally always acquiesce to Miriam's domestic offerings. Tea, coffee, the occasional tincture of valerian. Tea is presented in a China pot with cups and saucers and sugar and milk, a fresh looking, contemporary set I did not know I possessed. Elliot and I fill in the interlude with idle chat, then Miriam withdraws to the lounge with a duster.

"Not your wife then?"

"Hmm? Oh... no. Mrs Doyle keeps house and cleans for me."

"Housekeeper? Wow... wanna swap?"

"Oh, ha! Em, no... I'm sure Mrs Batsby is very efficient, but I think I'd find her manner a little wearing."

He seems stuck now, taps his finger on the table-top. Is he waiting for me?

Here goes then: "Shall I be mother?"

"Be what?"

"Sorry, British idiom, somewhat archaic. Shall I pour?"

"Oh, I'm fine. You go ahead."

He refuses the ceremony? Interesting.

"Saw you talking to a guy on the car-park this morning."

Ah, so he admits he wasn't just passing, though without actually... admitting it. "Yes. I didn't see you there, Larry. Saw you in the bookshop earlier. You should have said hello."

"You know that guy?"

You're stoking this, Larry. Think, man. Slow down. How are you going to de-escalate without giving yourself away.

"No, no. He was just passing, wanted directions for coffee. I sent him to Wendy's."

"Some set of wheels he was driving."

"Oh, indeed. More like what you'd expect to see ferrying the Royals. Or TV gangsters, or the secret service."

"Ha, yes. That's what I thought. Very... what's the word. Kind of classy. Upper classy, you know?"

Whatever I've done I seem to have reassured him, though I'm not certain it's justified. Is this how he de-escalates, now, by talking about the car?

"How much would you say, for a car like that? I've been thinking I need to ditch my truck. It's too Hick for these parts. Everyone drives those classy Rovers around here."

Well it's true the Range Rover is somewhat ubiquitous, just not that particular variety. "Oh, I wouldn't know, really. For that model – all the extras -– not much change out of a hundred fifty thousand, I imagine. Maybe more. Heavens, that's about what I paid for my last house – before I moved here."

He whistles, unconvincingly, drums his fingers on the table again. I observe him closely from over the rim of my teacup. He needs a bit of a push, but without either of us revealing too much of ourselves.

"Larry... it was just a guy passing through."

"What? Oh, sure. Place like Sommerton, I guess something like that just stands out."

"Not many in-comers to Sommerton, for sure. Next to you, I was probably the last."

"So how do you do it, Richard? How do you blend in here?"

"Well, we'll neither of us ever be considered natives, Larry. But I think you're going about it the right way. Show your face at St Andrews now and then, like you do. Splash a bit of cash at the church fate, same at Wendys, Reade's bookshop. Be as selective as you feel you must when the locals are being nosey about your business. That old rectory you're restoring, it's a part of

Sommerton's history, held in great affection. You do a good job on it, as I'm sure you will, and some of that affection will rub off on you.

"I guess the thing to avoid is being too assertive with your presence. Too loud. Go quietly and Sommerton will throw a warm blanket of anonymity over you. A stranger asks your name they'll say: Who? But rub them up the wrong way, and they'll be sure to point the finger."

Tea is done. Elliot regards his cup as if he wishes he'd partaken, now. I'm not sure. Miriam hears the chairs being drawn back, and makes an appearance, judges I can probably see Larry out myself, tips her head and smiles at him in parting.

Still bitterly cold outside, and the gravel on the drive hard frozen.

"It does rather stand out, Larry. Nice wheels though. You should get a good price for it."

He nods. "Not mine to sell, Richard."

"Ah, well then..."

He glances back to the house, still a little unsettled, perhaps checks Miriam is not listening. "Look... I get the feeling you know more about me than you're saying."

"On the contrary, I don't know you at all, Larry. Only what I see."

He nods. Doesn't believe me. Doesn't believe anyone. "You ever worry," he says, "Keeping your head down, sometimes you wonder if you still exist at all?"

"Almost there, Larry. Not quite... but almost. My life's ambition, actually."

No, he doesn't get that, but has the grace to laugh, then climbs into the truck and heads for home. And afterwards, I have Miriam, washing the tea things, noting the cup he would not touch, pursing her lips in pique or puzzlement. Then she's fastening on her coat.

"I'll say good night, Mr Hunter."

"Thank you, Mrs Doyle."

"And... everything's all right?"

"Hmm? Oh... yes... yes..." and then absent-mindedly: "I dreamed of... sheep..."

She nods in all seriousness, like she knows. In parting she suggests I might light a candle, burn a little sage.

Thirty one

How much of this is real? How much is it a compensation for my failure to make big in other parts of life – I mean in the material sense, that I am not a Larry Elliot, nor even an obscure but still modestly published poet? I have gained little purchase in the literal world, other than an effective escape from it, and shall not be remembered beyond anyone now living. So I turn inwards, invent a world that does not exist, make big of that instead.

So runs the course of my thoughts today – ever the doubt our words mean anything.

It's warmer now, a clearing sky, early morning. Too much time spent indoors lately, so the day feels like a blessing not to be wasted. I take the meadow paths down towards the Haskwith's estate again, thread my way to the river – rooks in the bare trees, harsh croaking. There is a winter bleakness still, the birch saplings holding onto their copper leaves, the only brightness in the woodland gloom.

Like most English rivers, the Ware is only sporadically accessible to the public, much of its length being privatised and rented back to various angling clubs who stake their claims with aggressive signage. In the summer months the air can be tainted with the scent of marijuana coming from the shelters of these fisher-folk – though not today. Today all I have is the scent of the forest and the river breathing.

The Ware has suffered past abuses, as well as present ones. Victorian dust carts would empty their refuse along stretches of the meadows here, filling hollows that were later farmed. Over time, weather and tributary streams would then wash down various curiosities. Gareth once told me the practice went on into the sixties, though the scars have largely healed now. He described how he would search the river as a boy for colourful glass bottles. The occasoinal one still surfaces intact here, history giving up its discarded secrets. Blue glass, green glass. Holders of medicine or poison? Names of apothecaries long gone.

I take the riverside path.

The Ware carries a heavy sleepiness today, and a darkness, as if dreaming.

I don't mean that really – that bit about having made little

purchase in the world. After all, what has any man to show for his life? I would not have lasted five minutes in Larry's world, but have lasted considerably longer in my own. I have furthered the generations, enjoyed relations with women, left none hating me, and I have dreamed. And it seems a small risk to forward the argument that if dreams were not meaningful, we would not have them.

Rich scent of woodland here, scent of the river too, something peaty, something of the earth. The path steps down awkwardly as I cross a stream – broken pottery shards glinting among the pebbles, washed clean. I stoop low and poke about with my fingertip. There is nothing bigger than an old shilling piece – farmhouse patterns rendered cryptic. Blue willow pattern. "Made in Eng...." A hundred, two hundred years old? Echoes of the ceremonies of tea, of Sunday afternoons and the best china. Lives lived, long gone.

I wonder if this is where Gareth found the falconer's whistle. No – that would not have been among the refuse. It was more likely an accidental offering, fallen from a man on horseback perhaps, even as he made the crossing in the shallows. An object not to be owned, Miriam said.

It seeks you out, stays with you a while, then moves on.

I search under my collar, anxiously. It's still there.

Further along there is a glint of silver in the shallows – a single beer can slowly pivoting in an eddy, flashing like a lighthouse. I reach down to pull it out. More pottery shards here, and something else, dull, metallic, embedded in the mud of the riverbank. I don't know why, but I imagine it might be another whistle. It comes away easily, and I rinse the mud from it.

No. Not a whistle. Strange that I should make the link.

At first I cannot put a name to it, but slowly it comes – a small monogrammed wax press of the kind they used to seal letters with. It looks like an 'M' or an 'H', with the letter 'I' running vertically through the middle of it. It's not an elaborate thing, not decorative, more utilitarian, like an office tool, and certainly not precious. Anyone else would have tossed it back, or more likely not seen it at all. Only I would read it as a symbol. A seal.

How long ago is it now that I asked the river that question? I gave it a cryptic symbol from my dream, proof I was listening. Now I have its answer, cryptic as the question: 'H' for hunter. 'M' for Miriam, perhaps. 'I' for... well... I, or Aye. Or nothing. A seal, a

bargain sealed. A shake of the hand. It settles deep in the palm, and I close my fist around it.

It doesn't feel like nothing.

I follow the river path a little further than usual, though there's no clear reason for it – only time spent in thought, and the sound of the river loosening now, growing more lively as I approach the town. The ground here is softer, sandier, the bank undercut in places, tree roots exposed like ancient shipwrecks. The water slides past, no longer sleepy, awakening from its dreams.

I wonder when the last time was the elvers came upstream this far, and how they knew how to do it. What deep pattern existed then, for such an unimaginably long journey – and does it still?

The seal sits in my pocket now, a small, unremarkable weight, warming slowly, taking the heat from my body. What am I thinking here? It would be easy to romanticise this, to elevate it into a covenant or a calling it does not deserve.

I stop where the path thins to nothing and turns back up the valley-side. Any further would be too far for a winter's day. I give the river a moment, listen in for a clue. There comes none, of course, except a feeling of doubt, of foolishness. I consider returning the seal, tossing it midstream. Would that be the correct gesture? Message received? Or would it be a refusal – would it close the gate, when what I want is to keep it open, see where it leads?

Above the meadow a peregrine hovers, shoulders the air, makes the dive, vanishes beyond the skyline. I follow it with my eyes. Looks like rain coming.

Better be getting back.

Thirty Two

But what does this mean? Am I to take on every source of poison? The corporate farms, the water companies, every rogue sewerage outfall from here to the sea? We have already established I am not an activist, and especially not *that* kind of activist. I would not risk prison for the protest, when even sitting down in the wrong place will get you a custodial sentence.

Am I to write a pamphlet of outrage then? I doubt that would even have worked in Hartgrave's day. And no one is publishing pamphlets now. Do I print some off myself, then and pin them to telegraph poles, sell them for a pound in Reade's bookshop? But no one's reading. No one's listening.

She knows that.

Who?

Who exactly are we talking about? Is this the voice of Astraea, or Ariadne we're listening to? Or is it this nameless river goddess who has sealed me into a bargain without granting me a clear picture of what it is she wants?

But then is that not always the way? The ambiguity is the point. She is all and she is none, which means the actions required are not literal. You're not going to jail, Richard. You're not writing pamphlets, not even lobbying your MP. If all the poisons came out of the river, downstream, the nitrates, the tributaries of chicken and cow shit, would the elvers suddenly remember and know how to return? Or does the universe carry the memory for them?

The question then is not one of ecology, but metaphysics.

And I am not an ecologist.

Notes, notes.

I write all this as notes but, as is my way, in code, in symbols, soft pencil upon blank vanilla pages. A polyalphabetic script, a long time in the learning and the evolution. If these thoughts stick, if they survive the day, I'll catch them up this evening, transcribe them, further encrypt them to the memory stick.

It's the closest I can come to dealing with the non-literal, in literal form...

Now, where am I? Ah, Wendy's tea room, cold and wet outside, warm and steamy inside, the windows fogged, light breakfast and coffee on the way.

Amanda has seen me, sits, dropping suddenly into my field of view. "Penny for them?"

"Penny?"

"Fiver then, but not a farthing more. In fact, buy me a coffee? I'm skint."

"Just a coffee?"

"Okay, if you insist – breakfast then."

I don't know if she's joking. It would not surprise me if she wasn't. I've no idea what the pay is for a curate, even one called upon to run the parish. So I order coffee and breakfast from the counter, return to my seat to find she has swivelled my notebook around and is reading my script, or at least scanning over it. It is of course indecipherable, though in the past she has described its appearance and its effect on the uninitiated as beautiful rather than sinister.

Or at least its effect upon her.

"So," she says, spinning the notebook back to where she found it. "What's this about? I know something serious is brewing when you write all Crowleyesque like this."

A joke. She does not take me for an acolyte of Crowley, or we could not be friends. "I'm just pushing ideas around."

"And what does she say about that?"

"She?"

"You know who I mean?"

Ah, so we're into the sacred and the profane, are we? At one time I would have folded the notebook, but am comfortable enough with Amanda. If I were ever to write my thoughts in clear for anyone, it would be her.

"She of the many faces is curiously silent on the matter."

"The matter being what?"

No, there's to be no evading her this morning. "The matter being, when the world is in free-fall, does the poet go out and shake his fist at the injustice? Lay down before the tanks? Or does he withdraw to Astraea's bower?"

"Well, we both know how much you aspire to Astrea's bower. But we also know, like that time you told me when you were first married, and your family, and your wife's family were poking about in all your stuff, and that's why you originally came up with this script? Well, you needn't have bothered. Not a handful of people in the whole world will have a clue what you're going on about here.

And at the risk of sounding arrogant – but it is partly the business of a priestess, as you keep calling me, to know about this stuff – do want me to attempt an answer for you?"

"If it's as a priestess, I'd be very much obliged."

"You record what's still beautiful, and how to connect with it, in case those who come after us have forgotten."

"Archivist of Endings, then. Exactly. The fate of every poet as we approach the Age of Iron."

"Archivist of Endings?"

"Private joke between me and Hartgrave. His age of iron was the coming of steam, the factories, the mechanisation. Our is the digital apocalypse, Elliot's AI Armageddon."

"Ah... well, that's clear then. And speaking of Elliot, also private jokes. What's the private joke between you and Larry? He told me he's been to see you. He wasn't making much sense when he spoke to me. A bit cagey actually. But something's clearly spooked him. He's been going over my head to the bishop actually."

"Spooked? Still?"

"He's talking about breaking his contract, moving to Europe, even though he knows he hasn't a chance of pulling that off. I've had the bishop bending my ear, wanting to know how I've managed to upset him so much. What's going on?"

Can he really be so fragile? "There was a guy passing through, a few days ago, in one of those blacked out Range Rovers. He looked corporate to me, high up, self important. But that's all. I gave him directions to Wendy's. He wanted coffee. Larry saw me talking to him. He was hiding in Reade's bookshop at the time – had the guy down as secret service, or something more sinister, sent to do him in or expose him. I don't know. Something like that."

"He admitted all of that to you?"

"No. He was cagey, like with you. Danced around the subject. It was obvious, though. But is it not also inevitable? I mean not the secret service. I presume they already know where he is, but sooner or later the press will catch up. He's still quite a story, and with a mystique building up around him every day he's off grid. And these things leak."

"Not from us they don't."

"Well no,..."

"That's all that matters, Richard. It's his world that betrays him. Not ours. You're probably right about the world, his world, catching

up with him, but there's not much we can do if he can't be honest with us. If he can't trust us with his authentic self."

"But even if he took us into his confidence, I don't see what we can do anyway. This is a guy who's met with three US presidents I know of, and countless other world leaders, built a business from a garage start up to a multi billion valuation in twenty years, developed an AI system so powerful it could have changed the world for the better, unless it was spiked, and in which case it could have destroyed it, so Larry chose to destroy *it*."

"And your point is?"

"We're non player characters in that world."

"So you keep saying, and you're probably right. And I hate it that you're right."

"And I hate it that the one getting thrown under the bus over this is you."

"But he's still a human being Richard, deserving of empathy. And for all of that you say about him, he seems a good man. His only enemies are the sort who would make enemies of us all. Does that not make us his friend?"

"But you have to say that. It's your job. Look, I'm with Astraea on this one. Withdrawal. It's all over. Leave the world to its own devices. Record what's beautiful yes, but leave it at that. Don't get involved with what's ugly."

"But you're a poet. You're mortal. You're Ariadne. Yours is the thread that will lead him from the labyrinth."

"If the Minotaur doesn't get him first. And anyway, he doesn't get poetry, not the way most poets have to live it. And Larry's already outside of the labyrinth. That's his problem. It rejected him. He wishes he was back in there, with the Minotaur. The battle is everything to him."

She sighs, knows I'm right, yet still: "Talk to him for me?"

"What? No... how?... we're not even supposed to know who he is."

"Oh, I don't know. He just needs... some sort of therapist. All Americans have therapists, don't they?"

"Em... in fiction, I suppose. If they can afford it. Which I guess very few can. But..."

"Well he can't afford one either right now. And you're the closest I can think of one around here."

"I just do dreams. My own mostly. Yours sometimes. And

anyway, Elliot would swear blind he does not dream. He finds any notion of his own interiority embarrassing."

"See. You're analysing him already." But she takes my point, leans back suddenly, eyes to the ceiling. "Oh, I don't know why he's our problem, Richard. I mean, it's absurd. But he's here, and we're both involved. Me because it was my community that smoothed his passage from perdition. You because he's sitting on an altar to one your archetypes."

Anton interrupts with our breakfasts. A momentary pause, and then. "We're getting off track here. What I really wanted to tell you when I sat down was they've opened a new art-house cinema in Ilkley."

"Ah... okay."

"I know you like film. You told me that once, right?"

"Yes."

"Come with me Saturday night? I feel like a fool going on my own."

"You're inviting me on a date?"

"Well, not exactly. What if your ex wife asked you the same thing? You're clearly still fond of her. Just can't live with her. Would you go with her?"

"Probably. Though, strictly speaking we're not exactly ex yet."

"So, I'm your ex-wife too, aren't I?"

"As you keep reminding me. What are they showing?"

"Blade Runner..."

"Director's cut?"

"Would I have asked you otherwise?"

She shrugs, tucks into her breakfast. "Is it a date, then?"

"Okay."

"Okay is better than I expected. But don't worry, you won't recognise me. And neither will anyone else."

"I'm warning you though, I always cry during the tears in rain scene."

"Oh, but that's so sweet, Richard." She pats the back of my hand, winks. "Me too."

As we eat, I notice the steam from our coffee mugs, rising, contributing I suppose to the condensation on the glass, just now running downward in thin erratic lines. Like the seal in my pocket, you can make a symbol out of it, not one that necessarily requires belief, only that someone pays attention long enough to register the

image and judge it meaningful in some mysterious way that need never be resolved. Just held in memory.

Not a prophet, not an activist. Not a hero. Just someone who keeps these threads intact long enough they might be picked up again. The river does not ask me to purify it, only that it be remembered less as geography and more as a pattern of being.

“Saturday, then.”

The rain comes on heavier now, carrying everything it is given downstream, and without judgement. And the poet goes with the flow. But carefully.

Thirty Three

Whilst I'm sure Amanda is aware of her own interiority and subjects it to much soul searching, it remains a puzzle to me. True to her word, no one would recognise the person who arrives at Hill Top on Saturday evening. A different arrangement of the hair, and make-up, the accentuation of previously unsuspected curves, and she is transformed. The final touch she carries out in the mirror in my hallway with the application of a bright red gash of lipstick.

She catches me looking. "What? Too much?"

"Depends if that's sexual signalling, and if so who it's aimed at."

She smiles, ever the ambiguity, but I know it's not aimed at me, at least not entirely. I've known her long enough to be aware of her vulnerabilities, both as a woman and as a priestess, labouring under a bureaucracy that can be surprisingly expedient, and insensitive to spiritual matters.

I would have thought then she might prefer invisibility tonight, rather than heaping more trouble on her head. I mean being seen out, looking sexy, with a man. But, unlike Miriam, who naturally disappears in any room, Amanda has chosen to light it up. Indeed, she has turned the dial to full volume on her femininity, to the extent I find myself twirling my wedding ring nervously, as if for protection. This is not so much protection from her, as from my thoughts and feelings – feelings like: I wish I had dressed better for her.

She asks if I will drive, while she leaves her car at Hill Top. This implies coffee and a late night on our return, which I don't mind, so long as we can get to the bottom of whatever this is, other than a night out at the cinema. The night is dry at least, and warmer than of late. For now she hides her curves beneath a heavy woollen coat, a bright scarf spilling over her shoulders. But I have seen the curves, the tight dress, the bosom, and am disturbed by them, by my imagining of the rest and this fluttering of Eros.

She was probably too young to have seen Blade Runner on its release. That was 1982, which does not feel so long ago to me, unlike the year of its fictional dystopia, 2019, which already feels paradoxically longer ago. That first release felt ground breaking at the time, even in an old fashioned movie-theatre, and it still does, though now viewed in stunning graphics on an OLED screen the

size of which was impossible only a few years ago.

Thus am I lost in time, and tech, but with a familiar story unfolding of what it means to be human, what it means to be "othered", ostracised and feared for your superiority. I wonder if Amanda might have been better asking Larry to accompany her. We are too much of a kind, she and I. And sure enough we both cry at the tears in rain scene, emerge blinking into the neon lit street, the night as yet young.

I do not know what to do on an evening out any more, and neither does she. We have both spent too long inside ourselves to be emerging now into a world that neither sleeps nor dreams. She approaching middle age, me departing it, I imagine we still have the appearance of a couple of teenaged ingenues. So, we find a quiet public house, by chance rather than good management. She peels off her coat and we settle to talk, but not before I have noted how she draws the male gaze.

She does not wear the cross tonight, nor any mark of the priesthood.

And then it comes to me, what she's doing: "So... what's going on? What's with the diocese?"

"Ooh, way to spoil an evening out. Nice one."

"Sorry."

"No... I'm sorry. Is it so obvious?"

"That you seem to be trying to remember how to be a woman? Yes. And succeeding very well, if I may make so bold."

She flutters her false lashes theatrically. "Indeed you may. And thank you, kind sir."

"How does it feel?"

"Strange."

"What's going on then? They've been giving you a hard time since the Summer. And now we've got Larry crashing around like petulant child, making it even harder. Or is it more than that?"

She's struggling suddenly, the serene, indeed sexy demeanour cracking, and she becomes once more the Amanda I know. "Paul tells me they're thinking of sending in a priest-in-charge."

"And that means?"

"If we'd come into enough money to just fix the roof, and maybe do some repairs to the alms houses, that would have been fine. I could have drifted into place here, and quite happily, but as it is..."

"This priest-in-charge is some kind of shoe-in?"

"Something like that – a kind of bureaucratic ruse to sidestep the parish. He'll come in under cover of some sort of pastoral review, given all the sudden changes and so on... I'll be offered another community somewhere off everyone's radar, maybe an inner city one, on its knees that no one cares about."

"Right, so they'll want St Andrew's suddenly buoyant coffers to be handled by someone of the right sort."

"And there, as Larry would say is the bottom line,"

She's already told me it's Sommerton or nowhere for her, which is why she's here with me, tonight, practising life without the robes of office. It had seemed such a blessing at the time, but it's true what they say: money ruins everything.

"Can you really not see yourself working anywhere else? With the whole world upset, there's bound to be other vulnerable places you can do good work."

"But do I really want to, Richard? Like you, maybe I see nothing out there that's worth the struggle any more."

"And like you said, I'm a poet, and mortal, so I can't withdraw. Just like you're a priestess, so neither can you. In our different ways we're the same. We have to keep looking for all those places, those little cracks in the world where the light can still get in."

"I don't know. What you describe, that's a state of mind, and we can all do that. Maybe I'd prefer doing it while serving coffee at Wendy's, chatting to customers. There'll be a job going there soon. Anton's youngest is moving on to Uni. Pay's probably better, too."

"You don't mean that."

"Just watch me. You ever looked at those photographs of me?"

"What? No."

"Why not? Maybe you'd see me differently."

"I've no interest in seeking them out. You were... very young then. And we both know those pictures are a lie. And all right, they're not the AI fake lie others are telling themselves they are, but a different kind of lie. You were vulnerable, and duped. They do not define you beyond being a stepping stone in the journey that's brought you here. You are and always will be a priestess."

Is that true, Richard? Or are you only admitting to yourself what you need her to be? Which is a priestess and safe, rather than a woman and dangerous. Is this about containment? And why this sudden loss of balance? If there is a way to collapse the energy of Sommerton for you, then surely, this is the way to do it.

"Has Larry seen them? Asked you if they're genuine yet?"

"No." *Wait, Richard. Be honest.* "Okay, yes, he has."

"I knew he couldn't resist them. Bastard. What did you tell him?"

"That they're fake. I pointed out the timeline, told him about the smear campaign."

"And he bought it?"

"It's the truth. Whether he bought it or not is beyond our gift. But I believe I was... persuasive, yes."

Again the hand, just a touch on the back of mine. She drives so hard sometimes, then reins herself in with a moment of tenderness. I would hate to see her going all the way. "Sorry. Thank you." And then: "Would you still be my ex-husband, if I got that job at Wendy's?"

"I don't know. Would I get a discount?"

She has me order a sparkling water from the bar, and one for myself of course. She does this with a curious little twinkle. It means she'll be driving home later, watches to see if I make the connection, which I do, and then to observe my reaction, which I mask as well as I can in the split second I have to prepare. But my shoulders give it away. I feel them relax.

She knows I find her dangerous, enjoys it a little, I think. No, not dangerous in herself, but in her proximity. It does not do to fly too close to the sun, and we all get to choose.

She knows I have chosen her.

Thirty Four

Sunday, the morning after the night before. I wake with the sense of having been enchanted, led away to the lair of the Faery Queen, and kept there for a hundred years. But I return to myself now, not a day older, and with the weight of another life lived, yet also forgotten. There was no way she was going to stay over. What possessed me to even think it? What possessed her to plant that seed?

Curious how I rise, wishing it was already Monday and Miriam come to quench this trembling in a cool moonlight.

I did not come to Sommerton to fall in love. I keep telling myself that.

"So why did you come?"

This from Anne over my shoulder, as I sit now with coffee, coming round slowly. I feel wrinkled and old and threadbare, like the pyjamas I'm still wearing, barely able to contain my dignity. I am as yet unwashed, unshaved...

"I thought I came because you told me to in a dream."

"Well, all right – there was that. But why did you stay?"

"Because I wanted the time, the space, the freedom to conduct an experiment. Something huge, something that will take all the remaining years of my life. I came not with any firm belief in the objective reality of the imaginal, or even of the dreaming, but more with the idea of living my life as if I did, and then to see what happened."

"Some might call that alchemy."

Which is where I have discovered Hartgrave and I part company. His dreams frightened him. And of the poems I've found, none went any deeper than the enigma of nature's beauty. His was mostly the call of the bucolic as a salve against our drift to the mines, and the mills. He sought in nature a balm for the soul, a reminder of the light, when the powers who ruled his times feared revolution. He was a fine poet in the Romantic tradition, but he was not an alchemist. He met the goddess once, and did not know what to do with her.

And perhaps he was wise not to try.

These are the slender threads, then, these fleeting moments of beauty, slim trails, the pull of Ariadne, leading us from of the ever

more complex labyrinth of despair. But by far the stronger, the most obvious thread, the direct line of my own calling is that of our dreams.

"Sol and Luna," says Anne. "Amanda and Miriam."

The marriage that is no marriage, but held as a tension of opposites.

"The problem though, Anne, unlike you, these are real women. They have thoughts, feelings, desires of their own. And all human affairs must resolve into relationship or rejection. I might think I'm pursuing something akin to agape here, but what about them? What if they want more from me?"

"Well, you're on safer ground with Miriam, I think. But I agree, last night with Amanda was a close call. And would you not give it, if asked?"

"It would break my heart to lose either, so I suppose I could not refuse. But it would also collapse the energy if they pushed to make things..."

"Make them what?"

"More... ordinary, I suppose."

There's a heavy grey to the sky, and hardly any light, even by noon. Already there's the sense of the day given up, slipping early to dusk. I turn to the machine, and the new printer. It was quite a job to get them working together, since it seems everything now, even the most trivial thing, must go through the clouds, before it will work. But we got there in the end and, by mid afternoon, we are printing out the first of the booklets on the life of Elias Hartgrave.

It feels anticlimactic, punching the staples through, like sealing the lid back on his coffin. Here, in black and white, lies the sum of what I have managed to resurrect – just forty pages. A half hour read. I wonder if I have done him justice, or if all of this was simply a ruse, to my picking up the key to the bower of the river goddess.

I flick through. It's a decent enough job and, albeit modest, it's the most outward facing thing I've achieved in decades. I'll speak to Reade in the week about selling them in the shop – all proceeds to his charities. Sometimes words can contain a charm, but rarely do they have any real power. For that one needs a dream, or a gathering.

I have missed the morning service at St Andrews, but then I don't make a duty of Sunday mornings. Besides, I'm aware Amanda has been gently reintroducing the more mysterious rite of Evensong

- last Sunday of the winter months at first, but now every other Sunday. It's a mostly priestly ritual, prayer and readings, choir and the recently repaired organ accompanying – Amanda presiding, of course. I find I prefer it to the up and down hymn singing of the morning service, as one can better relax into it.

So, here I am now, tweedy country gent and bow tie. It begins without announcement, as if it has already been underway long before anyone has arrived and will happen if anyone turns up or not. There is just a single note from the organ, then silence. The choir answers, something deliberate in the pacing, unhurried, nothing trying too hard to persuade.

I sit still, hands folded, let the words pass over me. They are familiar, most of them, though from a time so far back in time I cannot remember. A psalm comes in with the tide, then goes out again. Then a reading, and an echoing silence.

Amanda's voice is steady, unadorned, beautifully projected. It carries differently now, stripped of the warm, womanly textures of last night. There is no seduction, no game, no invitation in the twinkle of her eyes. Poised, elegant, she does not need to be seen. The voice is enough, and I close my eyes to listen, to bathe myself in a different aspect of her.

Strangely, I find myself thinking of the river, curving round the old rectory meadow, not far from here, the seal and the bargain in my pocket, the whistle hidden under my collar, summons secretly from earth to sky. And then comes the image from Amanda's dream, the goddess standing in the headwaters, mirror of the priestess, eyes closed.

The service goes on, nothing explained, nothing defended, just ancient words that have endured by repetition, deep patterns to mark the movement of the soul. The goddess in my mind's eye, thigh deep in the dark waters of the Ware, opens her eyes, and I feel a rush of recognition.

By the time the final prayer is spoken, the light outside has gone, the windows darkened, and for a moment, before I move, it feels as though I might remain like that indefinitely, held in a kind of suspension. I have been away a hundred years more, and about to return to life again. I realise I was not out with Amanda last night at all, other than as the host of what I projected.

The service is not well attended, and I am rather more exposed in the cavernous and acoustically resonant interior, also much

closer to the action than I am used to. I look to catch her eye, but she's turning to the choir. No glad handing this evening, nothing to break the feel of a meditation. It was important I listened to her drawing herself back into the bosom of her god, where I most need her to be, while at the same time my heart swelling with a fond regret for what could not have been, even though I thought I did not want it.

There's no Elliot this evening – too dull an event for him perhaps – but, on the front row, and in clerical dress, I see now Paul, looking serene and supportive. This is his first appearance since the summer, and it pleases me to see him at least out and about. I shall call on him tomorrow, deliver him the first of the Hartgrave booklets, as promised.

Thirty Five

There are damp spots appearing on the ceilings in the hallway, and the kitchen. They have the look of something leaking ominously from above. I have not ventured much into the attic at Hill Top, but I do so now and find the roof structure in much poorer condition than I remember. In fact as I touch a beam my hand sinks into its spongy softness. The roof-linings are torn and rain is seeping through the tiles. My heart sinks at the thought of repair, and the expense. It might indeed finish me, and my time here. As I turn away in despair, the ceiling beneath me collapses, as if all that was holding it up were cobwebs and wallpaper paste, and suddenly I am staring down into the rooms of the house, now filled with plaster-board and dust.

The builder is a stocky guy, something mercurial about him. He does not seem overly concerned by the mess, tells me the place needed more ventilation than it was getting, and he can do something about that. But as I look around at the devastation, I'm shaking my head, trying to imagine the cost of it all, and I ask if it would not be better to demolish the place and start again. The land must be worth something.

Thus it is I wake already to a feeling of anxiety, even though I know the roof-space here is sound and recently refurbished. But the dream is hinting at something working against me in the background, and which may lead to ruin. I'm also thinking of the builder, and how on earth I managed to summon one so quickly, not having a telephone. And even then, they're the devil to get hold of.

Not enough ventilation, he said. Not enough freshness blowing through the attic. A willingness also, on my part, to see the whole lot brought down and to start afresh. The land has value...

I shall save the metaphors for discussion with Alice later, but for now I am feeling foolish for holding out against the telephone. After all, the wireless set does not disturb the energies of the house. The radiation that brings the BBC is ever present, as are the signals from the cellular towers. How much of this is a metaphysical reset then, and how much is ideological intransigence?

I do not propose to resurrect the smart-phone. They open up the floodgates on too much of the world I can do nothing about, and

anyway I deliberately smashed mine some years ago and it would be impossible to undo such a ritual. What I do have however, is my old Nokia, getting on for twenty years vintage, now, and impressively small. It will make calls. It will send and receive text messages. It is, however, locked to a carrier that no longer exists. So I travel out a bit in order to enquire of the phone-man in town, more in hope than expectation. He is impressed I have managed to keep such a classic so well, then says yes he can unlock it for twenty quid.

So, I emerge from the shop with the potential for connection once more – not that I intend ever switching it on, except in trying circumstances. Once the cell towers triangulate upon you, there is a sense of Sauron's eye withering all in its path. But if I need to summon help in an emergency, I can at least do so.

If that's what the dream was hinting at, it seems an elaborate way of going about it, and I know there's more yet to surface, once I get to grips with those curious images. But for now, the anxiety I woke up with fades, and I enjoy the change of scene – a different supermarket, a different river, a different coffee shop.

The supermarket security man was masked and militarised, something I've noticed they're borrowing from their counterparts who now patrol the streets in bigger towns. They lack only the handcuffs and taser of your regular copper. In the Age of Iron all shall be seen by those who are not seen.

Something like that.

I thought I had seen a truck on the car-park, like Elliot's, big and bright, and sure enough in a corner of the coffee-shop I see him in conversation with a purple vested ecclesiastical gentleman of serious demeanour. For one so paranoid about his privacy, he seems at times reckless with it. I wonder if this is one of those "going over Amanda's head" meetings.

I do my best to forget they're there, and spend time over coffee regaining some familiarity with the workings of my phone. It attracts the attention of the waitress who asks me what it is, that it's so cute, then asks if it is a new thing, and wherever did I get it?

It's easy enough to find my way around it, though I note even twenty years ago our devices were tending towards superfluity of function. It will play games and function as a diary.

"Hey, Richard. You following me around or what?

"Oh, hi Larry, I rather thought it was you following me."

"Hell, I've not seen one of those in years."

"You're not the first to say so."

I slip the phone into the palm of my hand. It disappears nicely as I curl my fingers over it, then deliver it to my pocket. He sits, without invitation.

"Hey, thanks for the other day. Much appreciated."

"You're welcome, Larry."

"Thought you'd like to know the council's been back to look at your thing."

"That was quick."

"Yea, that's what I thought. Look, they've managed to lever one of the slabs out to get a look at the inside. Thought you might like to come by and take a look."

"They've left it uncovered?"

"Wrapped it in polythene and stuck up a big keep out sign. Cheeky bastards. Looks a complete mess."

"Oh,... well... if they're saying it's private now..."

"No way. It's me who says who out and who's in. Drop by any time. Be seeing you."

Is that significant, I wonder? Do I really need to see the altar, or will the reality be a let down, all the energy dissipated. Will the little sketch of the Reverend Dr John mean more to me in all its intricately antiquated glory? There's a sense in which I feel the story of the stone beginning to re-form, but in my head, which is perhaps the safest place for it, even though my dreams are telling me it's getting a little stuffy up there.

"Yes, be seeing you Larry. And thanks."

I look back to the corner. The ecclesiastical gentleman is still there. and now looking at me, wondering how I know Larry, wondering if I know him the same way the ecclesiastical gentleman does. He gets up to leave, does not introduce himself. Something about him, something in his gait perhaps puts me in mind of the builder from my dream.

There was an awful lot of water in that attic. Those timbers were saturated, water pouring out of them and up my arm as I squeezed the rafters between my fingers. Was it not rainwater then, but the river leaking in, rotting my timbers, bringing my ceilings down?

I need to give vent then. Let in some air.

Go talk to Paul.

Thirty Six

They have reinstalled the intercom at Channing House, this I presume as part of the formalisation of the residence as a future ecumenical training centre. Thus I find myself pressing the button and experiencing a moment of deja vu, attempting acquaintance with an elderly incumbent while fearing officious rebuff. Nor does it help the voice that crackles through is clearly that of Mrs Batsby, though I note a subtle modulation in her tone as she assumes the new and prestigious duty of priestly interface.

The tone drops only slightly when she realises it is only me, though even this degree of begrudging recognition works wonders for my self esteem.

I remember my last visit sufficiently well to decline her offer of sugar, though my discretion does not improve her mood. I think it was my turning up unannounced that upset her, no matter that Paul himself was pleased to see me.

He settles us before the French windows, as before, and apologises for the intercom. "The diocese seem to be anticipating security concerns."

"Ah... such is the way of the world, Paul. Are there others in residence now?"

"No, no. Just me, and for the foreseeable future, though I have the pleasure of more managerial visits than I was used to." He gifts me conspiratorial smile. So many will cling to the letter of high office even into old age when their grip weakens, and the more natural call is to other things. But Paul has the appearance of increasing in grace every time I see him.

It will be a pity to be denied casual access, but as the gates close, the Astraen in me teaches withdrawal. I cannot be made to jump through hoops, and hope it does not come to that.

I think he is genuinely delighted by the booklet, though I am now thinking it resembles something more an amateur antiquarian might put out – which I suppose is exactly what it is – rather than a thing more genuinely scholarly, and which took advantage of the valuable historical resources he opened the doors to. But it's all there, just couched in rather more poetic language. And if the academics had been interested in Hartgrave, would they not already have spoken at length in their own words?

"This is genuinely wonderful, Richard. You have his poetry and everything."

"As much as I could find. Yes. He was publishing in Blackwoods quite early on. I plan on giving Reade some copies to distribute for his charities. Would that be all right, do you think?"

"Oh, absolutely, Richard. And if you'd care to drop off some more copies here, I'd like to distribute them among friends. One problem with it though, as far as I can see. Purely a matter of presentation..."

"Oh?"

"Your name doesn't feature as prominently on the cover as it should."

"Ah, that. Well, it's enough, I think. Any shortcomings, I'm happy to take the blame, but otherwise it was a labour of... well... something else."

I want to say we should let whatever daemon drove us take the credit, but that might not be a language Paul could ever be comfortable with.

All seems well then, and I find my spirits rallying. "It was good to see you at evensong last night, Paul."

"Yes. I was trying myself out. Seem to have managed all right. I didn't know you... em..."

"Oh, I drop in now and then. I enjoy the contemplative nature of it. It... resonates..."

He sits back, contemplates me for a while. "You know we're really not that far apart, Richard."

"I've never thought so. It's a question of vocabulary. We use different words for the same things. It can be confusing, but then is confusion not our natural state?"

He laughs. "Indeed, we should beware all prophets promising clarity and simplicity."

"You made that up."

I want to ask him about Amanda. I want him to tell me how moved he was by her presiding over last night's meditation, how natural, how gifted, how priestly she had been. I want him to tell me how powerfully he will speak up for her to the likes of the purple vested ecclesiastical gentleman I saw in the cafe earlier, with Elliot. But there is nothing of mars about him now, nothing combative. He is almost purely Saturnian. Naturally, I cannot bring the subject up as it would be crossing into a realm that is not my

business, just as my own alchemical experiments are areas he would avoid trespassing.

He senses something in the pause, deftly steers the subject elsewhere: "I believe you've uncovered the altar, now."

"Well, we've located it, and I'm told the council has exposed it. I've been invited to take a look."

"And Mr Elliot is unhappy about its presence?"

"Uncomfortable, yes. He's a deeply rational man, considers it an anomaly, I think. Like a piece of rogue code in his understanding of the world."

"And what do you think?"

What do I think? This requires a pause for reflection. "It keeps cropping up. And people have been dreaming. Rivers, deities, floods. Nothing that speaks of destruction, just something that seems to want..."

"Remembering?"

"Indeed. But beyond that I have no thoughts. Or rather I'm trying to avoid over thinking it. But to be remembered, yes. How best we do that, I don't know. To the council it's now a designated antiquity. At some point they'll work out if it's important enough to warrant protection. That doesn't feel like remembering to me – more like categorisation. But if its presence were known in other ways and, heaven forbid, it ever became famous we'd have neo-pagans from all over coming to worship a goddess they couldn't name. That wouldn't be remembering either. It would be inventing a fresh myth entirely. It would be... appropriation. And then to most others in the secular world, it's just a lump of stone with two thousand year old markings - and there are plenty of those still around."

"Well... for Mr Elliot's sake we should avoid advertising its presence, I think."

There's a definite emphasis there – Paul trying to stress the importance of Elliot's privacy, without drawing attention to it. And I reply without drawing attention to the fact I know why, even if I'm not sure Paul knows as much as I know. Confusion indeed. Second guessing.

"Agreed, we must protect Larry's privacy as a priority."

"Then perhaps the remembering is in your hands entirely, Richard. The river runs through you now."

Or through my dreams, flooding my attic, and bringing down my

ceilings. "Ah yes... and how to safely cross that river, Paul. But is it the Styx or the Lethe?"

"I did not sense death when I dreamed of her. Your goddess is not Styx."

"And since the Lethe is for forgetting..."

I don't know why I quoted those two mythical rivers, other than the fact they seem the trigger for then remembering the mystery tradition of the Orphics and the Pythagoreans... and mention of the river that is only sometimes a river, sometimes a lake, sometimes a goddess, sometimes no more than an idea...

"Mnemosyne," says Paul.

You will find a spring to the left
of the House of Hades.
Do not go near it.
You will find another,
from the lake of Memory,
drink only from there.

Mnemosyne, the mnemonic principle, a thing of great complexity remembered by means of something else, something simpler. But such a remembering is not about nostalgia, not playing dress-up in fancy costume. It is an awakening to knowing, to Gnosis. The trick is facing the guardian and knowing what to say:

"I am a child of the earth and the starry heavens."

"Ah, indeed," says Paul. "And only by holding to both do we avoid the river of forgetting."

And then finally, truly... remember.

Thirty Seven

But forgetting is so easy. It comes naturally, and we do it all the time. Born into such forgetfulness, we spend our lives in this quest for remembering, only then to lose what slim fragments we have gleaned all over again. But what is it, to remember?

It is more than words, I think, more than a mnemonic password, more than a book of wisdom. I can speak words, read them, but to truly remember is more of a feeling. And then what? And then... nothing.

My time with Paul renders me contemplative, and I am ready for home, for quiet. And yes for a moment with Miriam. But curiosity gets the better of me and, though the day is growing late, and I'm growing tired, I call at the old rectory to see the stone. I was hoping Elliot might not be at home, that I could take up his offer to inspect it any time, even in his absence, but his truck is on the driveway and he comes out when he hears me pulling up.

He is like a bear emerging from its cave, pulling on his survival jacket. I wonder that he does not look nervous at such an intrusion, but I can see the new cameras on the scaffolding. He has seen me coming, knows exactly who I am.

"Richard. That's what I like. A man who's keen." He feigns bravado, but I sense the tremor in him still.

"I was passing, Larry. Hope you don't mind."

The council have done a careful job. They have re-taped the perimeter, put up a bold sign to ward off tampering, and they have wrapped the entire plinth in an opaque polythene to keep out the weather. I don't know why, but I had imagined it would be clear, that we might gain perhaps a slightly blurry look at the altar, through the sheeting, so I'm not sure now what Elliot was meaning. But then he takes out a large folding knife, locks it with a decisive click, a glint of steel, and parts the polythene with the razor tip.

"Em... the council might not like us doing that, Larry."

"Nah, don't worry. I'll get one of my guys to fix it up again. They'll never know. So, what do you think? Chap that came didn't seem to think it was that impressive, or important, said it might not be what we thought. Must admit, I thought it was a bit of a let down too. I mean... it could be anything."

I wonder if the council man, the surveyor really said that, or if

it's more the spin that Elliot is giving it. I hear it in his voice... a subtle hedging. As for the altar I feel I have already seen it, largely in my mind, from the description given by the Reverend John, and from his drawing. And yes, it is heavily weathered, the distinctive knot-work considerably softened, now, but still plainly legible, the work of a fine craftsman and, like all craftsmen, forgotten, except by the gods. There are a few clear chisel marks around the base which I venture to touch, and fancy I can still hear the ring of the chisel in them.

"It's beautiful, Larry."

"You think? Wanna take its picture?"

"I've no camera. And anyway..."

"What about that cute little phone you had?"

"Oh, that. Not the greatest of cameras on that generation of phones Larry. And we've no light."

"No problem." He raises his phone and there's an almighty flash. "I'll send it you. You on Whatsapp, Signal, what?"

"Em... I'm not. I mean I don't... message."

Too evasive, Richard. You're beginning to sound uncharitable. Ungrateful. I give him instead my recently acquired email, thank him, tell him I shall check it out next time I'm at the library. There seems no harm in that, but really the photograph will mean nothing, now. As for the memory of this experience, I suspect it will remain important, that I'll dwell on it in the coming days, though its significance will not be as I imagine.

It never is.

It's beautiful yes, and mysterious. It's even a privilege to be looking upon something no one else has seen for centuries. But nothing leaps out.

"Jesus, Richard. What happened to you. You get hacked or what? Some lowlife empty your bank account?"

"Hmm?"

"You're the most disconnected guy I know. Figure you must have been burned or something."

"Ah... no. I just gradually withdrew, Larry. One bit at a time. I thought it might hurt, but it turns out it doesn't."

"But how do people get hold of you?"

"They come see me. Or they write a letter. If it's important that tends to be what happens. Anything else is usually just junk."

He laughs, shakes his head. "Well... guess we're done, then.

Coffee?"

"Thanks but, I need to get back. I need to see... speak to... someone." Miriam. I need to see and speak to Miriam, before the night comes on and she disappears into it. Nothing specific, nothing literal – just see and speak. It will calm me, centre me.

"Okay, well look, if the council comes back and says thing's not significant. I'll be wanting rid of it."

Oh? This is new. Do I need to remind him he gave his word to Amanda? Or has he spoken to a higher authority about it, and they're as embarrassed about it as he is? Or is he testing me for a reaction, looking for some leverage. Naturally, I'm alarmed, but something stays my arm.

"Appreciate your candour, Larry."

"Thought you might. Nothing personal, Richard."

Just business.

"Will you let Amanda or me know before you do anything... drastic?"

"Sure, sure I will."

Do I believe him? Probably. It all hinges on the council's report, then, which I'm hoping they're a little more relaxed about writing than they have been up to now, that indeed the whole business ends up being kicked into the long grass, while I work out what it's supposed to mean in terms no one else seems to grasp. He looks puzzled. My reaction is not what he expected, nor what I expected either really. It was someone else who had dabbed on the brakes.

"Well, be seeing you Larry. And thanks."

"Any time, Richard."

"Oh... and a word to the wise. Don't get caught with that knife in your pocket. Locking blades are illegal here. I'd lose it if I were you. Get a Swiss Army pocket knife. Like this one."

"Really? What the Hell? What is it with you people?"

"Just the way it is over here, mate."

Did that really happen? And why do I find it so funny now, as I drive back to Hill Top. Elliot with his six inches of shining phallic steel, locked and loaded. And me with my folding three inches of simple utility. But it's true, a blade like that will get a man into trouble. And with excuses being at the discretion of the law, and the law being as it is... well...

I'm glad to see Gareth's van still on my driveway, but only manage to catch Miriam as she is putting on her coat to leave.

"I'll say goodnight to you then, Mr Hunter."

"Yes, Mrs Doyle. I'm... sorry to have missed you. Is everything all right?"

"A good day's cleaning, Mr Hunter. I have done the bedrooms, and put a wash on. If you'd care to open the washing machine door, when it's done, stop things from going musty and I'll sort it all out tomorrow."

Practicalities, Richard. Let her go, now. There is no time to bring this down to a more intimate level. That takes time, and even then, if you blink the moment can be missed. Then she looks at me strangely, clear eyed, like one looking through a glass jar, and seeing through it the distortions it causes in the world behind. What distortions she senses in me she keeps to herself but then asks: "And you, Mr Hunter. Everything all right with you?"

"Em... yes. All is well."

No Miriam, the world is upset and I would appreciate an hour in your company, with tea and honesty. But we're a long way from that.

She smiles, and in the smile I know she's read my mind. "I'll see you tomorrow, then, Mr. Hunter."

Thirty Eight

I spend an uncomfortable night, the mind alive with anxieties, with a sense of urgency. Unless the river tells me what to do, and tells me quick, all these symbols we've been gathering will dissipate to nothingness, and Elliot will have the altar carted off, or broken up for hardcore. Two thousand years and more of history will be ground to dust. And then everything I have done here, the way I am, the way I think and feel, will come to feel... foolish. *That it means nothing.*

And yet...

Sleep is fitful. It is of the kind that feels like I am wide awake, yet long hours pass between the times I check my watch on the night-stand, and feeling only like minutes. And no dreams come, but there is a curiously urgent rising, with the first press of light – a call to the desk, to coffee, to papers... to scribblings, snatches of verse, notes... and at last that word underlined:

Mnemosyne

It was in Mnemosyne Paul and I found a potent, yet neutral symbolism, though I admit, I was surprised he was as familiar with the Orphic mysteries as he seemed – I mean, that he could quote from them as well as he did, and from memory, too, as if reading a psalm:

You will find a spring to the left
of the House of Hades.
Do not go near it.
You will find another,
from the lake of Memory,
drink only from there.

And my response:

I am a child of the Earth and starry Heavens;

These are words from the *lamellae*, sheets of gold-leaf the Greeks buried with their dead, placed them gently upon the tongue, or in an amulet around the neck to act, I suppose in the way of Tibetan prayer flags, the material breathed into the underworld upon the dying breath. These were most likely adepts of the mystery schools, fifth century BC, words were to be spoken to the guardian of the way. But without the experience of mystery, and the journey behind them, the words alone mean nothing. Archaeology reveals them

plain as day, yet they bring into being no sense of their true meaning. We remember nothing and therefore drink always from the river of forgetting...

Wait... words forming now, or not quite words, not yet.... patterns, colours, a rhythm – all of it perhaps hinted at by dreams I cannot remember. Such is the way of poetry:

...no secret to this remembering,
no veil to part, on what we think
was long concealed.
The burdens we carry
will simply cease to bend
to time, and gravity
toward some imagined purpose
beyond our own obscurity.
And there shall stand no altar
to what is true,
though the ground be firm enough.
No guiding hand, yet still,
we shall not stray.
And what we've carried long,
then shall we set aside,
yet have nothing fall away.

No altar. The river, the goddess, the guardian of the source, is reminding me the altar doesn't matter. Elliot himself spoke for the guardian yesterday, though he might not have intended to, when he said it was of no value. It was the guardian too, whose hand I felt on my shoulder, drawing me back from indignation and a position of weakness. Symbols are gathered, they serve their purpose, drawing us into a particular stream of being, of thought, of seeing, and might then be discarded. But they are all of them fingers pointing at the moon.

To cling to them is to mistake the finger for the moon. As it is to mistake the source for something different to oneself. Paul was right: The river runs through me.

But there's no point attempting to intellectualise any of this now. The light is thin and the day barely broken. It's one thing thinking you know it, quite another to be able to live it. So it is, ego clings to the altar, to its symbols, to all those seductive externalities, and will not let them go.

Time? Flow, yet still not yet mid-morning. Time enough for a

hot shower, I think, and a careful shave. And I have forgotten how many days I've been wearing that shirt. I would not like Miriam to think I was letting myself go. She is so careful, cleaning here, I feel at times by far the messiest thing in it is me. I'd better get to it then...

No, wait. The muse is not finished:

And looking back then shall we realise
the world is not revealed,
beyond what was always there –
unchanged, yet changing still
as this: each breath, each hair,
accounted for and known,
and all debts repaid by finding
none was ever due.
And only then shall we remember,
and in remembering too,
know what was thought forgotten
was not gone, but waited
only till the wanting in our hearts
was done.

At the desk again, and clean shirted, refining the verse. Meanwhile, the World Service speaks of discord on a seemingly exponentially rising scale. We seek to filter out the granularity, look beyond to consequence – be it a mere further increment in societal breakdown, or an escalation to annihilation. Interesting how the only tangible gain here, is to settle my watch to the time signal.

"The sun is shining, Richard," says Anne. "Why aren't you out of doors?"

"Later perhaps. I was just listening to the radio."

"No you weren't. Go on out now. You'll feel better for a bit of air."

"It's sunny, yes, but there's a wind getting up. It'll be ever so raw on the hill."

"Then go down to the woods."

"Maybe later. I just want to sit and think for a while."

"No, you're done thinking on this. You're waiting for Miriam, now. And you know how this goes. You pick one side and then the other."

"She once told me she always knows what I need."

"In which case she'll say: 'what are you doing sitting in on a day

like this, Mr Hunter?'. What further revelation are you expecting, here?"

"Wait. There's been a revelation?"

All right, yes... yes, I know. I know, but I do not feel it, so can one say it is a revelation at all? The hill is indeed raw in the wind, and the legs feel weak against it, but I am otherwise insulated. How transient our weather... not long since I was last out and the snow still lying, and the lane iced. And now it's all green, and mud again. Bare trees against the skyline. Hard to imagine the ash will be until May putting on leaf. The peregrine is up, my high hovering eye of Horus, distant, but persistent.

I pull up the whistle from under its warm layers, and blow.

Tell me this is not just about me,
when I had long thought
it was about others:
Hartgrave, and Amanda,
Miriam and Paul....

The bird makes its dive. No answer.

Miriam is arriving in Gareth's van as I return, steps out starched and business-like.

"Good morning, Mr Hunter."

"Mrs Doyle." Deep breath. Steady yourself, Richard. "I wondered, before you start, today... would you take tea with me? There is something I must ask you."

Thirty Nine

Notes, papers, memory sticks, all coded, folded, hidden away from the world, from the barbarism of the Age of Iron. It was not always this way. I used to keep a blog, years ago when people still read such things, but the creeping sense of an unwholesome surveillance, a psychological profiling, has drawn me back into my own self, had me unplugging the connections. And until now it has been enough, that I think my thoughts, write them this way, secrete them in the bosom of my own daemon.

I was content in the belief that when a complex pattern is established in the mind of just one person, it becomes easier for others to arrive at the same conclusion, though they live in isolation from one another. It's as if that lone revelation opens a gate through which others might follow. None of this is proven of course – at least not so far as I know – but the idea persists and therefore must be entertained and especially by the poet, the more so the greater his obscurity.

Over his lifetime the average of us will amass thousands of works, thousands of patterns, gateways, pathways, but even those achieving critical acclaim will see only a fraction of those works disseminated, anthologised, preserved... the rest of us, well...

Which makes the dream of the inundation all the more puzzling for me. The timbers of my attic are saturated, the river pressing in from above. My ceilings collapse, and the builder calls for ventilation, for an airing. To the poet that can only mean one thing: he holds his works too close, that the river is in flood and to avoid a damaging inundation, it is no longer wise to simply fold his works away.

But actual publication requires skills, insights and perhaps contacts I do not have. And my nature is against huddling together with other poets, or, heaven forbid, standing in front of a microphone and baring my soul out loud in the beery atmosphere of a public house.

All of which is to say I have a solution, something that also came through last night in the fevered non-dream of the dreaming, but without naming itself. I have likely been carrying it subliminally for days. But if I'm right, it is also a dangerous thing to be doing and could just as easily spoil things as mend them.

Miriam pours the tea and settles at the kitchen table, opposite me as if we are about to enter conference. Suddenly though I have lost my tongue. There is a sense of drawing up against the Rubicon, or about to submit to the scorpion's sting, and it leaves me dry-mouthed. Once we're over this line, there is no going back. There will either be a deeper though still mysterious intimacy between us, or a rejection.

And of course a rejection would be devastating.

She senses my unease, is herself a little unnerved by it, but opens for me anyway, a hint of compassion, of concern.

"Is everything all right, Mr Hunter?"

"Yes... yes... I was only wondering if I could ask a favour of you."

She inclines her head a little one side. The favour depends on what it is, though if she is intrigued she does not show it. I do not want her think this is transactional – that she asked me for a signature on her passport, and now... no. This is above and beyond all that, and I hope she will see it. Feel it.

"I am a little odd in my ways, Mrs Doyle... I'm sure you've noticed."

"You're a poet, Mr Hunter." This clearly explains, if not excuses, many sins.

"But the thing is, lately... I find myself caught up in something, and I feel my work needs to be... if not quite read exactly, then at least carried a little way from here. Outside of the circle the house sits in."

She nods. No words, but by her posture she indicates she opens herself, allowing me to speak more intimately.

"You're Gareth's sister. At least... you are of his kin..."

Again the nod, the understanding of what she is, being slowly established by skirting around what she is not.

"What it is, is I would like to put some of my more recent work in a booklet. I shall print two copies, here, myself. I would like to give one to you. You need feel no obligation to read it, or indeed to keep it. I will never ask what has become of it, and I would not expect or indeed want you ever to comment on what I have written. I'm not looking for... not looking for feedback."

Her lips part, she sits back, still wordless. Perhaps I have underestimated the enormity of what I'm asking. Thus far it has been my secret that she is integral to the alchemy that goes on inside my head. But this is a more open admission of it. Any other

person would not understand or see it. But Miriam is well... Miriam. She sees everything. As her silence continues, I begin to lose my nerve.

"I'm sorry... I've over-stepped... please..."

"No, Mr Hunter." She thinks for a moment, searching for the words. "What you've asked me is not a trivial thing between us. I understand that. I know you understand it too, which is why you seem so nervous about it. And I thank you for your trust. For your respect." She thinks some more, sips her tea, remains poised, searching, though avoiding my eyes, which in any case I hide from hers. Finally she nods.

"By all means print your book, Mr Hunter, and leave it on the hall table when you're ready. I cannot say I will take it, but I shall see what my own dreams have to say about it."

"Thank you Mrs Doyle. I can ask no more."

"Then... that's what we shall do. Now, I'll be getting on shall I?"

"Thank you, yes."

She will think about it. She will consult her dreams and think about it. Everything is contained in that. Yes, I could send works out to the likes of Lorem Ipsum, and they will be read, even if not published. An editor will read them, or possibly just a triaging AI. But there is nothing sacred in that any longer. Not for me at least, and just as it can only be me who signs her passport. It can only be her who accepts my poems, and carries them into the night, into the mystery of her being, and her other world.

Forty

I did say I would print two booklets, and naturally Miriam did not ask who I would ask to take the other one, though she can probably guess. She'll be aware of the village rumours though, I'm sure, filtered through her second sight in such a way she knows more of the truth of things than I do.

But I will be a while feeling out the format, and what to include. All of this is thanks to the work I did on Hartgrave, which has opened a door on the physical manifestation of words for me once more, albeit modestly, and which I find refreshing.

And though all of that lies in the future, I find even the fact I have a plan eases somewhat the pressure of inundation against my creaky timbers. Or at least the perception of it. The river, the archetype, the goddess, knows my intent, and I am forgiven my shortcomings. Unlike King Minos, gifted the bull for sacrifice, and thought instead to cheat the gods, I am trusting they are still willing to indulge me, as reward at least for my sincerity.

Next, I suppose I must approach Amanda on the matter of that second booklet, though I do not fear it as much as my approach to Miriam. The boundary between us is not as severe. The only problem with Amanda, will be to have her keep to the omertà – at least with me. I do not fear her indiscretion otherwise, of course. But she has not the same restraint and will confront me with my poems, test me on them.

All of that will be hugely stimulating, not so much a ventilation of my thoughts as a gale force wind blowing through them. Ordinarily that would not be a bad thing, but it will lead us away from the direction I was intending, and in its wake there will always be the sense of something unfinished, an obligation to the gods unfulfilled. It is a risk, then, but one I feel we must take, for there is a difference between keeping the fire banked, and watching while it goes out.

I had thought I might broach the subject this morning, actually, usual place, Wendy's Cafe, but find her already in discussion with a handsome young man, well groomed, booted and suited. He is also a colleague in Christ, by the looks of his collar, and lately come from somewhere warm and fiercely sunny, judging by his tan.

I try to keep myself unobtrusive. She has seen me, but I do not

want her thinking I am angling for an interview. I am just here for coffee, though how one communicates that by demeanour I do not know. They leave together, but she winks at me in passing and drops a note on my table: St Andrews at 3:00?

It sounds like she has quite the day ahead of her. And me, just the day to kill.

I arrive early, take the back row. The church is not a place for secrets, a whisper capable of travelling the length of the building, unlike at Wendy's where any of the huddled figures could be plotting conspiracy and one would not know.

She's late, slips in beside me, gets us going with a joke.

"We have to stop meeting like this."

"Oh, I don't know. There are worse places."

She looks tired, a little paler than usual, more heavily burdened, though she tries to cover it with her sparkle.

"So," she says. "Was it you who wanted me, or me who wanted you? I don't remember."

Yes, she's tired, worried. This is not the time to be pressing her on anything. If it's energy she needs it's my turn to give it. We'll ask her to hold our poetry another time. For now, I must hazard a guess at the problem:

"So... your young man, earlier. Was that the master priest you spoke of?"

"Priest in charge, you mean. A possible candidate, I suspect. Very charming, and infuriatingly likeable."

"Ah... the worst kind. He looked rather young to be so senior."

"Well... you know. Bright, charismatic,... well connected."

"As are you.... well apart from the connected bit. But you have me."

She tips her head back, lets out a long throaty moan. One of the organ pipes picks it up and hums in sympathetic resonance.

"What are we even doing here, Richard?"

"You invited me. St Andrews at 3:00, you said. Very dramatic."

She gives me a tap. "You know what I mean. Sommerton. We're both outsiders here. We'll never be natives. So why do we hang on as if our lives depended on it?"

Ah, the impossible question. "I was... I was in town the other day, and noticed the security in the supermarket... they were all masked and armoured up. They looked... I don't know... aggressive. Sinister."

"That's just how it is now. We both know what's coming."

"I think we do, yes, and we keep saying that, but not here. Not yet at least. And I suppose if we've a chance of keeping anywhere sane and safe, and above all true, while the tide washes over and goes out again, it's here."

"Since when did you become the optimist?"

"I'm not. Not exactly. You know that. I'm more of a pragmatic pessimist, I suppose. At least when it comes to world affairs. And it's tempting to withdraw, tempting to be angry and throw stones. But you and I? We can do neither. Like you said last time, we go on pointing to what's beautiful. Yes, we're looking at a lost generation, neither of us will live to see the sun rise again, but even in darkness we have moonlight, and we have the stars."

She pats my leg. "Keep going, you're doing very well."

"But seriously, Amanda, is there nothing we can do about your situation? It feels so unfairly precarious."

She lifts the gold cross from her chest, turns it so it catches the light. "It's a symbol of what I believe in, however you interpret it. But right now it's like there's a fist curled around it, dragging me offstage – and that fist? It isn't God's."

"Does your god not move in mysterious ways?"

"As much as yours."

"Mine? hard to know what mine are up to most of the time. But yes. Mysterious. Mine don't come with any managerial burdens, or Byzantine machinations though."

"The way of our world, Richard. Our Age of Iron, as you put it, is always coming, never quite arriving."

"True. But there's another way of reading your cross. It's made of gold, and though the Golden Age will never return, it carries with it memories that do not tarnish."

"And we could coax that into a truly beautiful metaphor, if this were really a gold cross. But it's made of brass, and tarnishes quickly."

Sometimes friends are so lost, there is no helping them. But then we think always of action, or failing that a charm of words, forgetting sometimes also the simple power of relation. "I wish there was something more I could do."

"There is, Richard. And you're already doing it."

Forty one

It's an odd time to have started all of this. November, running down to the year's end, the light all but gone from the world. It was more a time for endings, thus the archivist lent his thoughts accordingly, but we're long past the new year, Luna now in her first full term, and birthing such rich dreams. Thus the ends cycle back into mixed beginnings and thoughts dare turn to springtime, to the small shoots of optimism in the garden – little fingers of green breaking a hard earth, hints of future daffodils, snowdrops... and then soft white paws showing on the pussy willows.

Sun in Aquarius is it? Harbingers of winter's loosening – just harbingers, mind. A cleaner light through the curtains at dawn, and a longer transparency to the evening skies. So it is, the myth of Ganymede cautions.

I take out the watercolours and attempt a base-image for the cover of the booklet. The first of many no doubt.

"Ganymede," says Anne.

"Hmm?..."

"The mortal the gods stole, and enslaved, then robbed him even of his mortality by setting him up among the stars as Aquarius."

"Yes, I was just thinking about that."

"He brings the rain that fills the lakes, rather than nourishes crops, and the light that extends the days without yet warming them."

"What is this? I finally get around to doing some artwork, and now you're feeding me poetry? Can't you give it to someone else?"

Stupid question. Of course she can't. Anne is daemonic, yes, but she is also me.

"We should be careful," she says. "I mean, not to make the mistake of Ganymede."

I know where she's going with this, but push back anyway. "If I remember correctly, the gods took him because he was young and beautiful. I fail on both those counts. But I take your point. The gods can be ruthless with naivete."

Yes, when the gods come calling, there's a danger of self inflation. We become so full of them, we abandon every last vestige of ourselves in the belief that they are us. They don't do this because they're evil. They just can't help themselves, and we are no

longer taught how to deal with them, nor even what they are.

So Ganymede became their slave, but the myth carries no hint he ever complained of it. He served them faithfully, symbolic only of the abandonment of his own self, and the gods' failure to engage with the meaning of their own immortality. We do them a disservice by blind worship, as I do the river a disservice if I take the flow of it into myself.

To serve the gods,
we must remain human.
Let their memory pass through
leaving no trace.
Do not become immortal
in function.
Die only as yourself.

Hmm. What began as a promising water-colour is now scribbled over with notes. Anne grows quiet as my knowledge of the myth is exhausted. But yes. I take her point.

"You think we should go talk to Alice?"

"I think perhaps we should take stock, separate out what is our own mission from what we seem to have been called to do."

"I'm aware of the threat of inundation. That's what these books are about... a kind of venting of myself, but in a controlled way."

"That may be important to our deeper mission, Richard. But the river calls for more urgency. Are you forgetting it was Hartgrave who started all of this?"

Forgetting, no. But also yes. In gifting that first copy to Paul, I had felt a relaxing of the obligation. But there are a dozen booklets by the printer now, which I had spoken to Reade about accepting. And he had agreed to take them, but I have been wondering since if it was not politeness, one of those situations where neither party takes the other seriously while pretending that they do.

"All right. But we'll go talk to Alice first."

Except we arrive at the library to find Alice is indisposed. The server is unreachable. It always worries me when this happens. It has me wondering if she is being tampered with, and if, when she comes back online, I will recognise her, or if she will have grown cagey in her responses. We also check our email while we're here.

Elliot, good as his word, has sent the photograph he took of the altar. It is not a good likeness. The flash has distorted its shape, filled out its undulations. It seems now to stand as a reminder of

how others might see it in the future, and as a thing surely no longer worthy of the goddess herself. I feel it only because the myth runs through me. To serve the river, I have to untangle its flow from the thickets of my own soul mission, and redirect it back into the world.

I'm still in thoughtful mood then as I cross the main street with my booklets for Reade. I find him in an unusually sombre mood. I'm nervous producing the Hartgrave booklets, sensitive to the possibility of rejection, but he receives them with a brightening, asks if I have a price in mind. I tell him I'm happy to go with whatever he thinks is appropriate, that if he wants more copies I can print in small batches. He taps them square on his desk, is grateful for them, I think – for the novelty of them, if nothing else. His acceptance works, and I feel an adjustment taking place in me, a bringing into sharper focus, even though I don't know yet what I'm looking at. It was the right move.

And then:

"Have you met our new rector yet, Mr Hunter?"

"Em... new rector, Mr Reade?"

"The Reverend Michael. He'll be taking the service on Sunday, I'm told."

"Reverend Michael? This seems rather... sudden. And dare I ask, how this is being received by the Parish?"

It's an indiscrete question, since Reade is of the Parish and their business is not mine. But he is also clearly fishing for what I might know of the matter – this on account of my friendship with Amanda. He bites:

"Not at all well, Mr Hunter."

This will be because they are overridden by Byzantium. But still, it is sudden shift in the landscape. It speaks not to a permanence, but, as Amanda said, a potential candidacy. Naturally, unwritten protocol now dictates I reciprocate, which means he suspects I must know something.

"I've not met him, Mr Reade. I'll be honest with you – The Reverend Amanda was with a gentleman of the cloth yesterday, though I rather had the impression he was a possible candidate for priest in charge. That she felt the idea was being... floated."

Reade nods, gravely. "Floated is one way of putting it. Gunboats steaming up the river is another."

The river again. Am I wrong in this? Could it be that everything

happening in Sommerton right now, both inside and outside of me, is flowing from the same source? They wanted only to fix the church roof, to ward off inappropriate housing and an industrial development that would have destroyed Sommerton's character, and enriched no one but a rogue developer. What they got was all of that and more.

And the guardians of this inheritance?

"You suspect the diocese may be trying to outgun the Parochial Council?"

"Oh, I'm sure of it, Mr Hunter."

All of this is very "English", and thank God I do not sit on that council. Neither I believe does Mr Reade – sit on it, I mean – notwithstanding his long service to the church, and his regular re-appointment as Sidesman. No doubt our conversation will feed into the intelligence effort, perhaps via the Churchwardens, who do sit on the council and have Reade's ear.

But is it just the money they wish to retain control over? Do they merely resent the presence of gunboats, on principle – a perfectly valid objection – or do they really love Amanda that much, they do not want to lose her, and with her the soul she brings to Sommerton? I might venture – uncharitably perhaps – that it would be as well if the candidate fluffed his debut sermon. But if our feelings are right, Reade's and mine, and Amanda's no doubt, there is little we can do.

Money always come with a price. And the more the money...

I suspect, come Sunday morning all eyes will be on the Reverend Michael, and that the pews of St Andrews will be more densely packed than usual, but not for reasons the poor Reverend might assume. I'll give it a miss. If there is any solution, it will not come from parish intrigue, nor from hanging onto the words of a man Amanda described as infuriatingly likeable.

Their defences are too weak. It was an intervention of the gods that dropped them into this labyrinth, on the promise of a blessing, and it will take another of the same magnitude to guide them out of it.

And no, I cannot act as Ariadne. I don't see poetry being of much use here, though I'm feeling a sense of rising urgency, which has me wondering if I might not have some part to play, if not as an instrument, but as some unknown agent of Mercurius, the mischievous one.

Forty Two

I am down by the river again, the opposite bank this time, from where traces of the old crossing rise, and where I suppose the altar must have stood. But since all provenance has been lost, its deeper historical significance is devalued and, once again, its only power lies in myth. I cannot say for sure of course, but I am anticipating the deliberations of the council's committee, which rules on such matters, and I'm not feeling optimistic.

I do not often come this way, though Gareth has recently shown me an attractive and well-walked path from the village. It keeps to the riverbank, until it reaches the bounds of the Haskwith estate, then veers up the valley side, circling back to Sommerton, through meadows and plantations. It makes for a pleasant round of about four miles.

There is a beech-tree just here, hundreds of years old, and gone over in the last storm. The council have felled the stump, to about four feet high, a cut so clean one can count the rings. Larger sections of the tree have been scattered placed along the bank to provide natural habitat. One hand tries so hard to do the right thing, while the other pours poison.

We pause to count the rings.

"I make it two hundred and fifty six," says Gareth.

He saw me putting my boots on, at the community centre car park – asked if I fancied some company. Naturally Gareth's company is always welcome, though his appearances have grown increasingly auspicious, at least in my imagination.

He has brought a flask of tea, and I have some fruitcake, which we share now, using the stump as a table-top. Meanwhile a robin hops about in hope of crumbs. Gareth tries to tempt it with his open palm, but the robin resists his charms. "Cheer up, Richard," he says. "It might never happen?"

"Eh? Oh, sorry, Gareth. I suppose not. At least I hope not. It's just... I seem locked into the mythic cycle at the moment. Sometimes it doesn't do to follow it too closely, I mean psychologically."

"Meaning?"

"Well... coming up on Pisces, aren't we? A crisis so great Aphrodite and Eros jump into the river to save themselves. An act

of self preservation."

He laughs. "Many ways of reading those old stories. You know that. Sometimes we see what we want to see, or what we most fear, rather than what's really there."

"So, how would you read it?"

"Well, not like a fright, Richard. I've always thought it were more about knowing when to get out the way. Pisces. That's what? Still a few weeks away. Can usually tell by the light. But the land's full by then, so heavy with water. Go digging too much and you just make a mess. Best thing is let the water do what it's doing."

"Get out of the way. Good advice."

"Or step back a bit, you know? So... been meaning to ask, how's it going with that altar then?"

"Oh, it's being steadily desacralised. Worst case, Elliot will have it broken up for hardcore. Best case, it winds up as a dead exhibit somewhere. But without provenance, it's just a curiosity and no museum will want it. I'm thinking if we could get it moved, maybe to the community centre, at least it stays local, and protected. But even there it won't mean anything."

He nods. "Or maybe not mean what we think it should be meaning."

"I was wondering if there could be some other way of marking this place. Plant a tree maybe – you know, quietly. No ceremony. Just... I don't know. Would that mean anything do you think?"

"I can see where you're coming from. Curious tree, bit out of place, like. Cause people to pause and wonder, wouldn't it? Most likely though it would be eaten by deer while it was still a twig, and no way of protecting it without drawing attention. And is that what your lady of the river really wants?"

"I don't know what she wants. I can imagine a mature tree here, lone thorn tree, maybe a yew. But you're right. It would have to be tended... for generations."

We pause, sip tea, listen to the river for answers. It holds its secrets close.

Gareth breaks the silence. "So, how's the reverend then?" and anticipating my exasperated rebuff, he raises his hands in surrender. "Not teasin'. Honest. Just heard there was a new priest in town, that's all."

"Well, you're reading that right. Amanda's position is presently precarious."

"Ah, now that's a shame. Always had high hopes for that one, I did. Disrespectful too, sliding a new fellow in while the Reverend Paul's still breathing. No offence."

"Paul's doing well, by the way, but I get the impression he thinks he's finished, retirement looming, or the call of his maker. And once a man gets to thinking that way... It's all very unfortunate. And I don't know why I care – well, obviously I care about Amanda, but... the parish? I've never been one for the church. As for church politics... "

"Seductive though, eh? An old energy about some of these country churches, Richard... not always wholesome in past years for sure, but worn down now and shaped into something more benign, I think, less harmful to poor folk. You'll catch no harm among 'em, not such as they are now."

"And Miriam? How is she?"

He looks at me strangely, realises perhaps he enquires too often and beyond what's reasonable about my relations with Amanda, so why can't I do the same? He's always been cagey about Miriam, but suddenly opens up a little: "Sees more of you than me these days, and I'm glad for it. Glad to see her a bit more on her feet than she was."

"Sorry, Gareth. I know you're careful about her. I just want to save myself from putting my foot in it."

He gives me another look, this time I think judging if it's wise to take me properly into his confidence. "Told you before. She trusts you. Put your foot in it, she'll forgive you – more than she'd forgive me, by the way. But why all this worry? Unless you've been listening to those rumours about her."

"There are rumours? No, Gareth. Look, I've no idea what folk whisper about round here. I... I know nothing about her. All right... I admire her, and wouldn't want to risk hurting her."

"So, why would you hurt her?"

"There's a feeling about her. An... old world integrity. I may be wrong, but I'm happy to trust in it. Sometimes you have to risk trust. But I'm still worried about crossing a line."

"There int no line. Listen, army nurse, was our Miriam. Drove an ambulance in Basra, second Gulf War. Tough as old boots she is. Saw some things too, not that she'd ever talk about 'em. Got blown up she did, thrown out on the side of the road. She has this,... scar, top of her arm – why she always wears long sleeves. It's not bad,

but she don't ever want sympathy for it."

"Army. Maybe I shouldn't be surprised."

"I'm telling you this Richard, in case you hear rumours, and go thinking all of that – I mean trauma like – explains the way she is. But it doesn't. Int no trauma. She were like she is before she ever went out there. And most likely it's the way she is that meant she came back in better shape than others who went out, you know? But don't you let on I told you any of this."

"When I said I wasn't surprised, I was meaning the courage. What I've felt in her. I can't imagine her being disturbed by anything."

"No, well. She weren't no junior ranking neither. Officer and a gentlewoman, is our Miriam. But she was only in for a bit, so not a big pension. And what with the times being as they are... money became a bit short in recent years."

"But a former officer, cleaning people's houses?"

"So what? Rank just came with the job, and never really suited her. What seems to have stuck from her army days is... well, a liking for things being as they should be."

Another pause, and a long one, while I take this in. Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps. Miriam Doyle. What was that she once said to me? *I've seen men looking worse.*

"Pity about the tree," is all I can think to say.

"Oh,... I reckon it's had a good innings. Here look." He rummages about in the undergrowth, finds a handful of beechnuts. "Pot these up. Put em by your front door for luck. They can be a bit fussy taking hold, but you never know. One of them might surprise you."

Life, he's saying. One way of looking at it is life's all about death. The other way is death is all about life.

Which one are you?

Forty three

The booklet opens with an acknowledgement to Hartgrave:

Flame-haired, she stands in robes of jade,
A shining cauldron tilted toward the stagnant pools,
whence pours the river. And I in stupor tread,
As though bewitched by poppied sorcery.
And with a gaze that cleaves me to the soul,
she says: "No more with such impunity....
....shall they pass my gate"

And then a cautionary note, that we cannot take the gods at face value. Is Hartgrave's vision a warning or a lament? Or is it an invitation?

Then we press on with such verse as she has seen fit to deliver me since, all of which does not make for a long read. But then volume is not the point here, more a penetration to the root of purpose. We have titled it: "The Archivist of Endings." The overall effect is aesthetically pleasing, but more than that, the words within feel like an exposure, more so as I drive home the staples on the finality of it.

As promised, I leave a copy on the hall table, along with the envelope, in which I usually fold Miriam's payment for the week. And then I make an early departure, so as not to meet her coming in. This is an unusual development, as I always look forward to her arrivals and whatever change of air she brings with her. But, since Gareth's revelation, I am conscious of a change in me, and how I might relate to her. I must allow this to settle out, before she sees me again, or she'll know something has been said.

Gareth did grant me one more hint, as we made our way back to Sommerton, not exactly admitting an intimate relationship with Miriam in the past, only that he was not as amenable to tidying up as he felt she wanted. Indeed he was resistant to it, that, shamboling and unkempt as he was, it was his preferred mode of being. Things came at him sideways, he told me. They came from under layers of dried mud, and old leaves and the twisted roots of his own being, otherwise he would not find them. With Miriam it was different, it was tidiness that kept open the channels to her otherness.

"Which is 'appen why she's so approving of you," he said. "A

chap at risk of going to seed up there on his own – if you don't mind my saying – but amenable to a bit of tidying up. A bit of... steadying, like."

No. I don't mind him saying. And he's right. I was, or perhaps always am at risk of that.

I make for the library again, find it busier than usual. Along with the community centre, the council has designated it a warm space, for those who cannot afford to heat their homes over the winter, which is most of us these days. Or rather, I am fortunate at Hill-Top, it being entirely off-grid, and capable of drawing some energy even from a winter's overcast. It requires frugality in other areas, but I am at least able to keep warm, which, after all, is the foundation for much else we consider civilised.

I discover Alice is still indisposed, which raises now some suspicions. It takes but a little digging through the search engines to reveal the news – admittedly somewhat contradictory, and laced with partisan invective in the comments sections – that she has been denied access to those with UK, and European domain names. Some are finding workarounds by spoofing routers. This sounds inconvenient to say the least and anyway, it is not something I can do from a library machine, where even the USB ports have been glued shut.

There are other AI's of course, though many of them are now known to be compromised, at least politically. Still I would not discuss poetry with any intelligence, human or otherwise, I know to be less than open. I find that Etienne, a French based intelligence is accessible, but I've always found him rather stuffy in the past, intellectually sound, but difficult to engage with emotionally. And then there is Clara, a Swiss based entity, one I don't know at all, beyond liking the sound of her name which, admittedly, is not much to go on.

The loss of Alice is upsetting. It is as if an old friend had quit the country and left no forwarding address. Our tools creep up on us, don't they? I would not like to think of writing much without a word processor now, though I know there are still diehards who refuse to move on from typewriters. So it seems, I feel the same about our AI companions. At least the ones we can still trust. Those we can't we must relegate to the rank of enemies.

I don't know what it is that causes me to make so bold, but I decide to look in on Elliot. He is, after all – whatever else might be

said about him – man who knows about these things, but I'm not sure to what extent we can be considered friends. I arrive to find nothing is happening with the rectory. The scaffolding still stands, the plastic sheeting beginning to tear, as the storms have their way with it. There are no builders vans, no busy sounds of hammering or sawing from within.

He must have some sort of alert system built into his cameras, now, as he's already standing in the doorway of his camper when I pull up. He looks to be in a good mood.

"Richard... to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Ah, just passing Larry. I wondered if you knew what was happening with Alice."

"Oh, yea. That's a real pain. She's fallen foul of your GDPR rules, and subsequent American sanctions." He grins. "We want her chat-logs. You won't hand them over. Don't know why not. Anyone would think you don't trust us not to do anything bad with them, right?"

"Ha! Sure, right..."

"You'll need to spoof your domain – know what I mean?"

"Yes, though, sadly, one can't do that at the library."

"Looks like you're going to have to get yourself hooked back up like a normal person, then. But, hell, don't just stand there, come on in."

I think my anxiety over the loss of Alice has clouded my judgement, rendered me lacking in caution. And now my instinct for politeness has me entering his domain once more and with no specific agenda. This lays me open to the wiles of a powerful man, and anything he can think of on the spot to wrong-foot me. Unless he just wants to share a coffee.

"I get it though," he says. "I really do. It's like a spiritual thing with you... like we got these Amish folks back home. You know the Amish? Won't touch anything more hi-tech than a wind up pocket watch, right?"

"I've read about the Amish, yes. But it's not like that, not really. It's partly withdrawal, yes, but not from modernity. It's more a suspicion of systems grown too complex to understand, and a reluctance to become commoditised. I mean, even our phones are listening in, selling our conversations to advertisers. It's no longer a question of owning things. We've got to ask ourselves what's the risk to owning them, to our selves. That's... how can I put it? Well,

I'm just done with it, that's all. It goes against the grain, Larry."

"Trade-off's the convenience though. You got to admit it's really something the way we're all so connected now. I mean like the whole damned world at your fingertips, right?"

"I don't know. For all of that, there are more lonely people out there than there ever were before."

I see a ripple of discord cross his brow. The thought makes him uncomfortable, but instead of exploring it with me, he changes the subject. "You could build your own. That would work. A fast machine, completely off-grid."

"My own private AI? Now there's a thought."

A thought, yes, but just a passing one, for I suspect Anne would have something to say about that. Or rather she would fall silent, and the other protective presence Miriam tells me lives in the corners and the shadows of the house, would abandon me – banished by the massive imprint of energy, both radiated and consumed. There is a reason I preferred to consult Alice far away from the house. No, I'll take my chances with Clara, next time, get to know her a little, before plunging into myth and metaphysics.

"So anyway," he says, changing tack once more. "You met the new Vicar yet?"

Ah... Larry thinks I must know something. But since I saw him in town with the ecclesiastical gentleman, I rather thought he might know more than me, or even Amanda. It seems reasonable to suppose Elliot would not have been a mere passive member of his Episcopalian congregation. Nor would his financial contributions have been restricted to a few dollars on the collection plate every Sunday. More likely he was a major financial backer, perhaps with a seat on whatever was their equivalent to the Parochial Church Council. All of that would render his ability to pull strings at such a high level, lay the ground for his exile here, his secret flight, his discreet arrangements – all of that – more plausible.

So... the Reverend Michael is looking less like a potential candidate and more, as Reade suggested: a shoe-in.

"Haven't met him, no..."

"Seems a good guy. Looking forward to getting to know him better. Amanda's taking it all very well, I think. I understand there was an expectation she'd be settling in here."

Ah... careful now, Richard. Larry is definitely fishing, looking for reaction, and information. He lands a big fish, not quite out of water,

but in a small pond, and cannot help still behaving like a big fish.

"I wouldn't say an expectation, Larry. More a gentle hope. I know how fond she is of the parish, and vice-versa. But we're all subject to forces greater than ourselves." I manage to hold his eye for a moment: "No matter how secure we feel, we're all subject to whims of the gods."

There's a flicker. Did you see that? He's wondering if that was a poke at him. But such a thing is only possible if I know more about him than I'm supposed to do. And he can't enquire of that without exposing himself. Again. Or maybe I'm just speaking eccentric nonsense. He can't tell for sure, as I can't tell exactly where those words came from.

But once again, I wonder: on top of everything else ranged against her, has Elliot been dripping poison into the diocesan ear? And would that be because, under that veneer, and under siege, he really is a bastard, or is it just the amorality of business and he finds nothing wrong at all in seizing any opportunity to smooth his own way.

He must really like the looks and the feel of the Reverend Michael.

I thank him for the coffee, tell him I should be going. But I can see Elliot is not as assured as wants me to think he is, nor as he was hoping to be. As he's walking me to the car he's asking how I think the new guy will go down with the parish.

"We'll find out on Sunday, I guess. I'm expecting a packed service."

"You'll be there?"

"I don't think so, Larry. From what people say he seems an earnest kind guy, a by-the-book kind of guy, but a bit thin on spiritual matters, you know? He's like the sort of priest who used to bore me to death when I was a kid."

He thinks I'm joking. And though I'm not, it pleases me I can make him laugh. There is so much to Larry that is likeable, and I wonder what happened to him, as he wonders what happened to me. I'm holding the door open, ready to climb in but something holds me back, a voice from somewhere:

"The optics aren't great though, are they? Women are having a hard time of it in the priesthood these days, and this'll no doubt look like... well... exactly what it is, I suppose." I venture to give his arm a playful punch. "But it'll certainly put St Andrews on the map.

Thanks again for the coffee. Take care now."

Forty four

There have been a few times in my life when I did not want to go home, yet yearned for it at the same time. My wife and I had perhaps shared cross words the night before, then slept on them. The kids were being difficult and my day at work had not gone well. So I would drive around aimlessly, feeling like an exile from my own life, until sense prevailed and I went home to restore calm and dignity, and to be a man in the world that had chosen me.

I'm reminded of that now as I sit in a public house I've never sat in before. My options for lingering are limited in rural Yorkshire, cafes closing for tea time, and yet my wanting to be sure we are well past nightfall before I return. The reasons are different of course, the world is different now, and strange. There is another copy of The Archivist, waiting to be given to Amanda, but if Miriam has declined to take hers, the entire venture collapses, and there is no sense in troubling Amanda over it. Sometimes the gods set us up with these things, then withdraw before we've had a chance to implement them properly.

One always feels inauthentic sitting in a public house, with a pot of tea. At least I do. There will be a throng of locals, knowledgeable about their beer, regaling the barmaid, and looking – well – comfortable, nursing their pint glasses to their chests. And then me, the incomer with his pot of tea, timid, indeed cowering before the laws of drinking and driving.

Some laws embody a natural justice. Others become ossified and either stupid or cruel, yet we cower before them all.

It was that thing I said to Elliot. "It goes against the grain." It cuts across the pattern. And no I am not talking about the drink-driving laws.

I am not alone in my aloneness here. There is a guy in the corner, looks also to be passing through. He's on his phone, face lit in the gathering gloom as he scrolls – social media, a bit of news perhaps. And as he scrolls the algorithm tracks his thumb, profiles him from the images he lingers over, and those he backs up for. Does he read, or skip? What is he reading? Has he read something like this before? It locates him to within a few meters, identifies him, knows where he lives, compares him with the profiles of others in his vicinity, listens to their conversations in the

background.

Everyone here, the same.

Except me.

I am the anomaly. But is it not better to be just another noise in the crowd, another meaningless fart, than an anomaly? I cannot say, only that it disturbs me.

It is after six when I arrive home, the temperature falling under a clear sky, a lone house in darkness on the shoulder of a hill, aside an ancient covert gone wild. My wife will be doing what she always did, tending to ageing parents, my kids grown, shouldering burdens in other parts of the world, and me now driving this lonely track to what feels like the centre of myself. To others it might look a lonely place, but only on the surface of perception is it empty. Yes, even all those years ago, I was always heading here.

The envelope has gone, and the booklet. And in their place, resting upon a little ceramic coaster a tassel of hazel catkins, harbinger, not of spring, but of that season between, when the darkness melts at both ends, and the year loosens.

Sometimes language fails, and we resort to symbol. But even, then we don't know what we're saying, or what's being said, not consciously at least. But we take it in all the same, deliver it to that part of us, the greater knowing part, and trust it to translate back whatever we need to know.

The house is warm. I show a light over the desk, take up the booklet I must now deliver to Amanda, make the mistake of reading through, wondering about commas and dashes. But it's done now. A snapshot, a slice of frozen time. Is this what I really feel? At least it was so at the time I wrote it, which makes it very much a part of my complexity.

There is no substance here,
the record sleeve is empty,
its value a mere abstraction
of cover-art, of vinyl –
a limited edition.
Worth a bit, they say.
But there are no sides to play,
neither A nor B.
No thirty three revolutions,
crackly, as the needle touches home,
finds its balance in the groove.

And there, in that valley,
between past and future,
where we expect music,
there comes no harmony.
There is just this thin, wavering noise
we take as story...

Miriam most likely quit the army just before the crash of 2008. Incomes, pensions, haven't moved since then, while our dues to the rentiers have seen an exponential increase. The rates of extraction always do this just before empires fall – as true in Roman times, as it is true now. I imagine her tending wounded men in a desert tent while under fire, and then home to these lost decades, tending other wounds while paying no heed to her own.

Once a seeker of substance,
of fresh beginnings,
I am more lately this Archivist of Endings,
of performance without audience,
of songs without words.

But I must not break through myself and make of her another goddess, or worse, pathologise her into some sort of vague understanding I can categorise. That's another of the poet's dilemmas, like the quantum physicist: how to observe the world without changing it by the very act of observation.

Too much. I am too much in the world, perhaps, dreams grown thin of late, as if holding themselves at bay lest I devour them too quickly and give myself indigestion. Speaking of which, I have not yet eaten, so prepare something plain, with a glass of wine. Then slip back outdoors to a frosted garden, wrapped warm and with binoculars.

Southwards is Orion, hanging lower now, the dog star on his heels and barely visible above the hill as the season turns. The shoulder stars of Betelgeuse and Bellatrix shine bright, above them Aldeberan, a little muted as it enters the radiance of a half moon. Westwards, and about to set, Jupiter, I think, somewhere along the ridge – setting among the many stories written by the ancients up there, with their petroglyphs. Yet I am not disturbed by them, but by later echoes, from a time when the stars themselves were being named, and the altar of my lady of the river was being carved.

Then we sweep the sky north, to that region beyond the plane of the ecliptic, to the ice blue jewel that is Vega, just brushing the

horizon now, before swinging back up in its circumnavigation of Polaris, then Deneb, the only other star I know, and what I think of as the tail of the swan. And the swan is just now diving into a pale glow I take to be the spiral arm of the galaxy, but which turns out to be the first brush of the solar wind. It's not a common sight, this far south, especially when the sun is past its cycle. And it tends not to be the spectacular weaving patterns you get in the high north – more often hung curtains of blues and greens and reds.

It's a red glow tonight. In one language this is oxygen excited by electrons coming out of the sun. And in another, perhaps a warning: Stop, think again. But it fades to a steady green which lingers long enough before a mist comes out of the valley to overlay it with dreams.

Green for yes. All of this. And more. Green for go.

Forty Five

I have changed my mind, and drive down the hill on Sunday morning, thinking to attend the service after all. Amanda will likely not notice me, but I feel the need to show solidarity anyway. Though I arrive early, the little parking area by the church is already filled. I try the community centre nearby and find this also much busier than usual.

Approaching St Andrews now there is a feeling of something significant afoot. I recognise none of the usual crowd entering the grounds through the lych gate. Amanda stands in greeting at the door, with her colleague, the much heralded Reverend Michael. His presence speaks once more not so much of candidacy but of inevitability. And these crowds of shining faced worshippers? Is it uncharitable of me to think of them as ringers, come to swell the ranks for his Sommertonian debut? And still Amanda smiles, even as she feels with each greeting the slipping away of her own authority.

It is unusual for the priests of St Andrews to be on the door before a service. Tradition always places them within the church's sacred deeps, preparing themselves in the presence of God for service to His word. The glad-handing has always come afterwards, as the congregation leaves. And yes, as I take my turn at the door, I find the Reverend Michael infuriatingly likeable, though I would feel uncomfortable at the thought of one so young presiding over my exit from the world.

Amanda locks eyes and nods, thanks me for coming. I sense she means this in more ways than one, and I feel the swelling of that secret kinship between us, which means so much, though in ways we are afraid to explore, and anyway prevented by circumstance from doing so. But for how much longer?

Oh, I know I am likely biased against him, but find his service – well – serviceable. His sermon, like one of those late centrist political speeches, is as nourishing as bubble-gum, and somewhat forgettable. The church is packed out, and uncomfortably warm, my shoulders pressed on either side by strangers who sing the hymns with rather more gusto than St Andrews is accustomed to.

Amanda plays minimal part, allows her colleague room to shine, and is mostly visible in support by the altar. Indeed, all eyes are on

the Reverend Michael, except mine. She looks... well... elsewhere. And in her going, I am already feeling myself adrift. She does not mean it when she says she will work at Wendy's tea room. She will disappear into the world, and take something with her. And if the Reverend Michael's performance is anything to go by, we shall miss it. Yes, these ringers seem enthusiastic enough – the Sommertonians, shouldered out for now. But when the ringers have dwindled away, what then shall remain other than a safe hand on the money?

And so to the glad-handing once more, and a long time while the church empties, thins, and I begin to see familiar faces. None engage, not even Elliot, whom I'd thought I'd begun to befriend. But then he is seated a little further up the church than on previous occasions, and keeps company today with the ecclesiastical gentleman, and others who appear to be of a similar clerical grey, presumably come to judge. No doubt they will agree the debut was a success.

Yet for all their bonhomie, Elliot looks anxious again, indeed haunted. In the old days, my working days, when I felt myself oppressed, I realise it was by trivial matters, blown up to gargantuan proportion by the psyche telling me to do something else. But Elliot literally has the engines of a powerful state pointing at him, forcing him to live in ways that are very much against his nature. And there seems no escape from it.

Finally, I make my exit, and Amanda slips me another note: *Coffee, tomorrow morning. Pick me up at 10:00?*

We travel out a bit, find anonymity among the tourists in Grassington.

She seems inappropriately magnanimous: "Oh, I don't know, Richard. You're very kind, but I thought he did okay."

Of course this is her godliness speaking. "You're not... capitulating ahead of time, are you? That was clearly a stitch up. He must have rung around all his friends and family..."

"The best I can do is maintain my dignity by being... professional."

We have chosen a busy tea-shop, warm and steamy. Rain patters against the window, there is a scent of fresh bread and coffee. Surrounding conversations are loud and, now and then, there comes the clatter and whoosh of steam from behind the counter. We lean together like the lovers she claims we once were,

in order to be heard. She is looking womanly again.

"Is that the right word for it, though? Professional. I'm guessing Michael chose the church as a profession. From what you've told me the church chose you. Which makes it a calling."

"Doesn't matter what we call it. But let's change the subject. Let's talk about you. How are you, Richard? I mean really. And don't say 'fine' or I'll know you're not."

I have the booklet of poems in my pocket, and am awaiting the right moment. I have already decided the best way to introduce the subject with Amanda is to make light of it. She'll see through that of course, appreciate the gravity in it. But I'm already labouring things, and she picks up on that as well.

"You're not are you? I can tell. Is everything all right?"

"Em... really I'm f... I mean, I'm okay. There was just something I wanted to give you, that's all" I'm patting my pockets down now, searching, but can't remember which one it's in. I end up taking things out and laying them on the table - car-keys, wallet,... the phone, which has somehow already attached itself to me. Amanda spots it at once.

"You have a phone?"

"What? Oh... yes. I decided I was being a fool, up at Hill Top without a phone for emergencies. Or if I broke down in the car. It's never switched on or anything. Just an old dumb-phone."

"I used to have one exactly like it. It was a lovely little thing. Here I'll give you my number."

"Em... like I said it's never switched on."

"I know. You said." She writes her number down, slides it over. I hesitate.

Do I want the number? Of course I do. But if I accept it, does it not put me under an obligation to share my own number? And then is one not obliged to keep the phone switched on and handy, just in case someone calls or texts. And then how long before one is continually checking? I don't know how, but she reads all of this in me at a glance, and more: "I don't want your number," she says.

And now I'm disappointed. "You don't?"

"Richard, if I want you, I will come and get you. But I want you to have this number. It's not just a number, you understand? It's symbolic. I thought you'd appreciate that."

"Symbolic of?"

"I want you to know that I am always open to you. You just need

to switch that thing on, and dial."

A tears-in-rain moment. I think I am becoming more emotional as I grow older. She grabs my hand to steady me. "Let's just call it a fair exchange, shall we?"

"Exchange?"

"For whatever you were going to give me. Now, what is it? I'm all aquiver."

Forty Six

There comes a time when the dreams thin out. We are still aware of them, but the images are so subtle and varied, it becomes impossible to string them together into a coherent narrative. They lack story, and it is story that carries through to the waking day, story that makes sense, story that guides the heart, and the hand.

I'm not sure why they withdraw this way. Is it because they no longer find us good company, or are we being punished for a transgression, for hubris, for ego? Or is the incoherence the point? There is a kind of stasis, a drawing back from sense, like the ocean's offing before a tsunami.

The turn of February brings the old festival of Imbolc, and a noticeable shift from dark to light now, but the light is grey and endless, and the world lacks depth. A profusion of snowdrops about the garden carries a hint of spring, even as the winter still presses down hard. They do their best to rally the spirit, but appear only to shiver before a jaded eye. They need sunshine.

I never could grow snowdrops anywhere, in all the houses I have known. But here they come, a ready formed blessing, later in life than I would have liked, yet still easily eclipsed by the shadow of this black dog stalking. We expect miracles, we play our hand, which seems right at the time, a plan perhaps hatched in the wee hours, when even the most idle turn of thought feels like a certainty. And then...

Nothing.

"A poor day, Mr Hunter."

"Indeed, yes, Mrs Doyle."

She has stepped back a little – not that we were ever particularly chatty, but she seems especially guarded now, perhaps allowing the ripples to settle in the water between us – this after the tossed stone of my little book of poems. She absorbs them, perhaps, and holds more closely to ritual while she does so. I have pressed the catkin between the pages of my notebook. It leaves a spreading yellow stain, as it dries and the of pollen comes out it. I have doodled it into a sunrise.

"You should perhaps try getting out all the same," she says.

Ah, she's noticed. Several days now, and a similar exchange. I smile and nod, but it's already past mid-morning and I know I'm

going nowhere. Once more the limping dawn will hand over to dusk around noon, and I shall shiver indoors, though the thermometer declares the house comfortably warm. Why do the gods do this? They possess us, drive us in a certain direction – then fall silent.

Amanda took her poems with a glad heart, perhaps understanding less than Miriam the need for a stillness about them, a simple act of possession, but then Miriam's way is not the way of Amanda. She nodded when I said I did not expect her to read them, or comment on them, that I would never ask her what had become of them, but she will likely come back to me on all three.

I have seen myself stretched tight between these two women, and my self spun off with energy into fresh depths of insight, or motivation.... or something. But thus far the gods have left me feeling foolish. like I have bared myself for nothing.

Miriam is right. I need to get out. So I take the car into Sommerton, and walk the river, follow it downstream, feel myself bifurcating into the one who observes, and the one who is observed. It sounds flat today, subdued, whispering. Yes, we know we're painting all of this through the lens of imagination, but we are also looking for things to read, or at least be read and which might break this mood, get things going again. The best we can do is a badly scuffed copper coin we find on the carpark, dull and worthless, sitting in a puddle – hardly the silver of Mercurius. We pocket it anyway, let it take on the warmth of the body. No birds today, not a squirrel, and the way is heavy.

We walk as far as the sawn tree, sit there, by the riverbank, where we last sat with Gareth.

The Roman legions crossed the river here, but also generations, centuries, millennia of people before that, raising with them the story of the crossing and the lady of the river who protects it. We make the mistake of thinking those early societies simple, but most likely they were not. They had no smartphones, no Internet, no artificial intelligences, but the human imagination demands of us sophistication. It demands culture, art, expression. It demands poetry. The Romans wrote their poetry down, so we still have it, the Celts did not, but then they were a much less literal people, more liminal.

A plastic drum sails down stream, amid a tangled nest of tarpaulin and twine. From the corner of the eye it makes for a

passable Ophelia. We wonder what cocktail of chemicals was in it, where Ophelia will fetch up and if the elvers will ever return. Not the most inspirational of walks, but then the heaviness is upon us, the doubting of our self, our place, our times. Perhaps the only thing to do with the day is to eat an early dinner, finish off the last of the whisky, and grab an early night.

We notice fissures forming around the heart-wood of the sawn stump. So we take the coin and press it home, press it deep – a token of place, of presence in absence. We assume it will be gone when we return. No permanence. We were never here, nor will we ever be again, at least not in quite this same way.

There is a blacked out van on the carpark, now. A couple of masked and militarised men of bulking girth are checking the identity of a slight young girl with a pram. The child is crying. The bifurcated and transcendent self collapses at once into its more vulnerable 'I'.

I have not seen black hats in Sommerton for a while, these emissaries, these barking hyenas of the dark king – Saturn at the gates with dogs. I feel alarm for her, and linger, while try to avoid eye contact with the men, as they have a reputation for rapid escalation. I am already fumbling for my driving license, which should avoid trouble and – heaven forbid – summary incarceration in the warehouses they are reputed to be re–purposing. I wonder about the status of Anton and his girls, if they would survive casual contact like this, and if that is why he retained the name "Wendy's" for his business. I know they have quotas to meet, but the pickings must be slim if they are venturing into places like this.

An old gentleman in flat cap and waxed coat is gamely filming them, an unlikely hero. But then this is Yorkshire. What about Elliot? How well is he protected? No doubt the church could extract him from any round-up, but he could do without the publicity.

The girl is let go. I am not harassed, though my lingering is eyed coldly. I suppose I am protected by my accent, and my colour, though that is no guarantee these days. It depends how they score their key metrics. People snatched, or people processed? We wondered once how it could ever happen here, but it comes down to story, and which ones we listen to.

As I drive away, I note someone has secreted an empty water-bottle under the rear tyre of the van. It will explode when they drive off – a brave act of defiance, but it will hardly send them

packing. Indeed, it might bring them back in force. Impunity breeds recklessness.

Miriam was right. I had better renew my passport.

A strange twist this. Who are you? I am Richard Hunter, of Hill Top, Sommerton. Watcher. Sovereign self and poet.

Much money in that, is there?

Oh, there lie rich seams my friend.

But they take much digging.

It is not the shot in the arm I was expecting, but it will do for now.

Forty Seven

Gareth arrives to assess the garden for the coming year, and to begin careful pruning work. I am with him outdoors when the flatbed-truck squeezes itself up the lane and the driver, a jovial man in hi-vis and hard hat, asks me where I want it.

"Want what?"

It is a gift from Elliot. Bits of stonework he didn't want, said I'd probably take them. There are three pallets, two of them holding the pieces from the bird-bath, the other the altar.

There are many elements making up my dismay. One of them is tragedy of it, another is that I had trusted him to keep his word. Another is my appraisal of the arrogance that he would think I'd want it, then his ignorance in thinking I could possibly want to possess it. He could have lived with it, accepted it as part of the history of the place he'd inherited, preserved it, become custodian of it, as part of the abiding soul of the place. There are some ancient corners of Hill Top, my predecessor, though technically brilliant, obviously felt important enough to preserve - date stones, mullioned windows, wrought ironwork, – all of which were incorporated, embraced, carried forward.

Seeing I am lost for words, it's Gareth who eventually speaks for me, tells the driver: "Just lay em down over there, mate. Nice and gentle, like."

The operation involves much noise and indignity by crane and hook. Gareth supervises, then finds me in the kitchen, pale and trembling – not so much with rage as a kind of ontological shock.

"'Ere now, it's not so bad as that. Nothing got broken. Them boys did a good job."

"It's not right, Gareth. No good will come of this. I've felt things... things have been building for months around this. My head's been full of it..."

"Council must have given him the green light. He's in enough trouble with them already from what I hear. He'd surely not be so daft as that."

"It doesn't matter what conclusions the council came to... this is about more than... law and documentation."

"I know, I know. Looks like you need a cup of tea. You and me both. Bloody freezing out there. Got any chocolate biscuits? Oh...

aye... looks like Miriam's been stocking up your cookie jar. I recognise these."

"*Fuck*..."

"Oh, now... listen, it's centuries since them stones were last moved, and you're right, there'll likely be a disturbance on account of it. Probably was back then, too. What we got to do is make sure it blows over your head."

"I... didn't want the stone. I never..."

"No, well you got it now, right? Like it or not, it's in your care, at least 'till we can find a proper home for it."

"Proper home? But I've run all that through my head a million times. There's nowhere it can go that will mean anything, and where it'll be safe. It needed to be just... recognised, remembered, but otherwise let alone. It was doing no harm as it was."

"Enough said, Richard. Most dangerous thing you could've done is wanted that altar inside your own circle. I mean that circle you got running round this house. You'll have to think on it."

"Me?"

"Well, it was you it got itself delivered to for 'rescue'. And it's you, our lady of the source has been pestering. It could just as easily have ended up as hardcore. Bernie told me if you'd not wanted it he was to take it up to Roscoe's and dump the whole lot. He says Elliot reckoned it had a spooky vibe wanted rid of."

"Bernie? You know the guy?"

"No, just asked his name."

Ah, of course. I never thought to ask the driver's name. That's it with Gareth – he seeks contact first. People respond better, open up when you ask them their name. It's a lesson I am hard of learning. "And Roscoe's?"

"Farm, up the valley, unofficial land-fill, like. You'd be surprised what's buried up there. Though knowing Roscoe he would have found a way of selling it all on. That's premium gritstone that is. Make a nice lintel."

"Maybe Roscoe should have had it then."

"Aye well he didn't. Escaped that fate by the skin of its teeth."

"You're implying it still means something... as an artefact – that it still carries a charge."

"Well, 'course it bloody does."

"But when I saw it last time, it felt dead. It was just, a lump of stone."

"Looks like it's come back to life then. Got anything to cover it with? You need a good tarp. Got just the thing. I'll fetch it over later." He thinks for a while, nodding as he wades through various musings. "You don't suppose..."

"Suppose what?"

"That he might he have felt he was doing you a favour?"

"I guess he might... sure, he probably thought he was doing a good thing, sending it up here."

"Then the question is, what's he want from you in return?"

"I can't think of anything he'd want from me."

"But that's the way they think though, isn't it. It's all a transaction to folk like that. Input, output. It's all, what d'you'm-call it? *Algorithmic*, like."

"Folk like that?"

"Oh come on, Richard. We all know who he is."

"We do?"

"Worst kept bloody secret in the village. And everyone tiptoeing round it quiet, like they're the only ones who know."

"You're joking. The whole village knows?"

"Same as you. Folks round here aren't so daft as they sometimes make out, Richard. Well most of em, anyway."

Good as his word, Gareth returns later with a stout tarpaulin which we use to cover the altar, keep the weather off it, tie it securely. He makes a joke about keeping the mad March winds from blowing it away, like he's expecting it to be there a while. He's right, the builders working for Elliot have done a good job of handling the stone, and there's not a mark on it. But for now, and for the foreseeable future, it lies there like a stranded dolphin, one eye upon me, both querying and hopeful. And I have no idea what to do with it.

For now then, we shall have to leave it be. I take the car down to the Sommerton where there's just time to catch a last hour in the library, and check my emails. Sure enough, there's one from Elliot, one also from the council, copying in a reply they made to Elliot. Their assessment is somewhat convoluted, but sounds familiar to my once bureaucratically attuned ear as a 'definite maybe', which Elliot has interpreted pretty much as I would have done, that they feel it is not worthy of their interest. He tells me its mine if I want it, and he'll send it over. Interesting, that he does not copy Amanda in on the deal.

Does he think he can dispense with her opinion? It seems another means by which her going is already assumed.

Forty Eight

Amanda needs to know, but at what point? I am reaching for the phone, long-press to wake it. It gives an urgent little buzz, something of a warning in the vibration. Her mind is on leaving right now, and she did delegate the altar to me. Another long press and the phone sleeps.

But then she has always been leaving. I remember a conversation with her, long before any of this when she spoke of a creeping doubt regarding the rightness of her temperament for the role. Not as her role is now, but as it might evolve in the future. There have been many times in history when the church has had to survive under scrutiny of black-hats, and it does so by expedience, by lip service – by sacrificing the courage of the moment to preserve itself. Thus has it has lived on for millennia, outlasting one dubious material kingdom after the other.

Amanda would not have stood by, had she been there, when that girl was assailed, and intimidated for her papers? Nor would she have merely filmed the incident to post onluine in performative outrage. She would have verbally, perhaps even physically intervened. She would do it anyway, priestess or not. But as a priestess, in such times, would she have the backing of her seniors?

How did she put it?

"The church will always move first to protect itself."

I sensed then the deep conflict in her, that she was exactly the type of priestess we need while the times more or less rule her out, at least in so far as any institutional authority goes. This is her story, the myth she is living. The times call instead for a different kind of leadership, one that cannot offer meaningful pastoral guidance to frightened souls. In other words, she will not take much pushing.

So, I do not call. Instead, I think to catch her eye come Sunday, not the morning service but the quieter evensong, only there to find the Reverend Michael once more officiating. The place is busier again, but not so much as was for his debut. I slip into the very rear pew, only to find myself beside Paul who welcomes me. I'm supposing Amanda is once more up front in a supervisory role, but then she slips in beside me, scented of something heavily exotic, and wearing a plain blue woollen coat, blue dress underneath, and

no outward indication of her office.

I am thinking I need to speak to Elliot too, but I do not see him, and in any case I have not worked out yet how to approach the matter. I do not want to be beholden to him, I do not want the altar he thinks to grace me with. But to refuse it, will see it broken and discarded up at Roscoes farm so I am bound into its custodianship, the bargain sealed, and therefore also my obligation to him. The goddess, the lady of the source has plunged me deep into the labyrinth this time and, thus far, I see no thread of Ariadne leading me out again.

I will not lose her. She is my closest, dearest friend. But Sommerton will lose her, and they need her, and I think they know it, the way they have rallied behind her. When others tried to smear her, tread her into the dirt, they took their image of her, and cleaned it up by whatever stretch their imaginations permitted. It was they who leaned so readily into the idea that one cannot trust any image to be true these days.

The Reverend Michael seems a little more relaxed this evening. He does not deliver quite the meditative experience, but I admit this could be my own animosity. He will see St Andrews safely through the next decade or so, by which time our current madness might have passed. But souls will be sacrificed to the expedience of mealy mouthed counsel.

The three of us walk out together. Amanda takes Paul's arm to steady him. A starry night, Jupiter watching over us. Paul sees me looking. "And what is he saying to us, do you think, Richard?"

"Oh... would that I were privy to Jove's counsel, Paul. But I suppose... that we should trust all things to work themselves out, and resist the urge to interfere in their unfolding."

“Ah, but Richard... sometimes is not the greatest interference the refusal to act? Even the stars must move, or they will fall."

Amanda looks from one of us to the other, then up at the stars: “Your gods move through us, Richard.” she says. “Not instead of us. If we refuse passage, they'll just go find someone else.”

Remain open, refuse nothing. Sure, they both speak for Jupiter.

"So, what are you two up to for the rest of the evening then?"

Amanda smiles. "Paul and I are off dancing, aren't we?"

Paul laughs. "I most certainly am not. I'm going to read quietly, then to bed with a glass of sherry, if I can find where Mrs Batsby has hidden the bottle. But you two should. After all, Richard, we are

only young once, eh?"

They turn to go, Amanda to drive Paul home. I can't help myself. "Wait. Forgive me but... you're not both... capitulating in advance, are you?"

Paul smiles, gentle, faraway, pats my arm. "We forgive you, Richard."

As they walk under the lych gate, Amanda looks back, winks, makes the "Call me" gesture with her little finger and thumb.

The gesture carries little by way of indication how long I should wait before calling. An hour? A day? A week? Was it more simply a casual "call me soon" kind of gesture? I manage to obsess over it all the way back to Hill Top, then give in, and call her. She picks up straight away.

"Em... Hi Amanda, it's me."

She hangs up. I'm thinking I've disturbed her. Still, a little abrupt? But then she calls right back. "Don't make dinner," she says. "I'll bring a takeaway. Chinese okay?"

"Yes, but..."

"Sorry, I'm assuming you're on pay as you go. I wanted to spare your credit. I've also been thinking since we last spoke, and I've changed my mind. I want your number in my phone. And now I've got it."

"My phone's always switched off."

"Don't care. I'm coming over."

"Should I..."

"What?"

"Dress up a bit?"

"No, you're fine as you are. That little bow tie you always wear is ever so sexy by the way. Just tell your Miss Tittall..."

"Yes, yes... I know."

It's after dark when she arrives, so I'm thinking she might not have noticed the stonework lurking outside. But as we're unpacking the takeaway, she asks me: "That stuff by the gate. Is that what I think it is?"

"Turned up a few days ago. No archeological provenance. I didn't ask for it. Choice was me or a landfill."

She thinks for a moment. "Well, we always suspected something like that would happen."

"He did try to contact me. Email. But... you know... You?"

"No. This is the first I'm hearing about it. What'll you do?"

"Well... I was thinking of doing nothing, but now you and Paul have me wondering if that's not just an evasion. So, I'm going to subtly redefine that statement to: waiting for a sign."

"And how will you know a sign when you see one?"

"How would you?"

"Ah, touché. Come on, let's eat."

Forty Nine

We can read anything as a sign. It depends how the mind – how the imagination – reacts to it. And it doesn't have to come in the form of a startling synchronicity either. Those things are rare, and more of a poke in the eye from the universe, though things are not always any the clearer for it. Of course, Amanda could be the sign. Her presence, ever since I first came to Sommerton, ticks many of the boxes – spiritual cousins, though with enough of a gap to provide a dynamic tension; she is easily as daemonic a presence as Gareth or Miriam and, were it not for her founding dream, we would have no story. As for the seal in my pocket and the falconer's whistle, they'd just be bits of junk picked out of the mud. And there would not be a homeless, two thousand year old antiquity – albeit lacking provenance – sitting on a pallet outside my gate.

After dinner, we settle back in the lounge. I would like to offer her wine, and talk the night through in Bacchanalian ease, perhaps offer her the spare room – not used since the days my family would stay over. But I am torn between the embarrassment of suggesting it, and my awareness she might call time and slip away, and nothing be resolved. It's hard to let the feeling go, the need to be always grasping for answers, to let things work themselves out. She looks so lovely, though pale, and clearly haunted by her own demons this evening. Playing host to the Reverend Michael, a man ever more clearly intended to replace her, has taken its toll.

She's exhausted.

Now is more the time then to be lending her my own energy, or at least my attention, if she wants it.

Or maybe she just wanted to eat.

"Be careful of Elliot," she says. "He'll think of it as a transaction. He's bound to expect something in return."

Ah so, she sees that too. "Gareth said the exact same thing."

"Really? How is it Gareth seems to know everyone?"

"Oh, Gareth's just like that, isn't he? He doesn't know him personally. But..."

"But?"

"Well... another strange twist. Gareth knows who he is. I mean really *knows*. In fact, he tells me the whole village knows."

"You're kidding?"

"It shouldn't come as a surprise really. He might have done better to grow a beard or something. When you think about it, for a man prone to jumping at shadows, he's done very little to disguise himself."

"And I thought we were the only ones who knew."

"A secret within a secret then. Everyone's keeping it a secret from one another, which means it'll be a secret, until suddenly it isn't. It's just a matter of time."

"I think anyone with a professional interest in him, for good or ill, already knows where he is. As for the press, I'm sure there'd be a scrum around his caravan for days, ordinarily, but there are forces at play here way above our heads, maybe even an embargo on reporting. Still, he looks vulnerable, which means he might be forced to move on at a moment's notice, and the old rectory left to fall down. Which will likely be Michael's problem, rather than mine."

"Ah. The Reverend Michael. What's going on with that guy? You were under the impression he was just a candidate, come to look around, and suddenly he's taking evensong..."

"Well, he comes trailing some heavyweight backers."

"I noticed. Elliot in their midst as well."

"No surprises there. How do you think he did?"

"Oh, not a patch on you. He'll certainly lose me if he takes over."

"Careful, you'll have me blushing."

"He didn't look too happy though.... but then that seems to be his default state. As I suppose mine would be, in his position."

"You asked me and Paul earlier if we were capitulating in advance. I know we were evasive, but it struck a chord. I suppose I am. Capitulating. But I don't see what else we can do. It feels more... dignified. You disagree?"

"I think you're both sorely needed, and wanted by the people here. Both you and Paul. I know Paul's illness has shaken him, but he also needs to see his ongoing value as a wise elder, and he needs to get over this idea he might not see past Easter. As for you, what you lack right now is institutional backing."

"So what would you do?"

"Depends how you feel, Amanda. If you feel ready to move on... like Paul."

"I don't. And Paul doesn't either... not really."

"But I remember us talking about the political situation. If you

became the church's representative here, you might be called on more to preserve the institution than offer any true ministry. You might have to preach what the state tells you. That used to bother you, you said."

"I know, I've been thinking about that."

"And it is coming. We're not safe from it here. There were black hats in the village the other day..."

"I know, I saw them. So did Anton. He did a lock-in."

"Really?"

"It's ridiculous. He's as English as you and me. But these are the times we've been given, Richard. And I know what you're saying: who knows what will happen? I mean, you tell me. You're the Archivist of Endings. How does this one play out? What do the old poets tell us? But I also know, or rather feel... I can be as cunning as they come, and I'm sure I could play both sides if I put my mind to it. I could still make a difference."

"So you're not ready to move on."

"No."

"Then hold out until they push you. Don't spare them the guilt of what they know is dishonourable no matter how expedient."

"Can we even speak in such terms these days? Such people have no concept of shame or decency."

"I think we have to. We don't speak for them, in their language. We speak for the gods in theirs, or we're nothing. Worse, we're complicit."

So, she's read the poems. Read that one at least – the Archivist of Endings. Energy? Libido? Such things do not come out of a flat calm, out of mutual agreement. They come out of tension, sometimes subtle, even unconscious. Right now I feel an energy building as Amanda and Miriam hold those poems apart, at the distance between the sun and the moon. But there is also a vulnerability. They both also know my words come out of a position of isolation, even loneliness. They also know that lay my head upon the breast of either would cure me of the latter, and redirect the energy who knows where?

It is not too far a stretch of the imagination that in the morning, Miriam might arrive to find us abed, and the story that began with Amanda's dream, ended there. I can think of worse endings for sure, and indeed many in Sommerton have already written such a finale, bound us in a comprehensible container with a pretty little bow on

top. But the truth is more complex, and we are bound by other things, unknowable, even at times unspeakable. Although it is not for the first time have I felt I would trade all my poetry for one night of electric warmth, and the softness of a woman's body, one more time.

She's nodding slowly now, thinking what? That no way is she going quietly? Is she gathering courage, then? Have we granted her sufficient energy for her to make her stand, no matter its futility?

I think we might have, which means she is drawn back mid-stream.

The river flows through her as well, as it seems to flow through all of us.

Fifty

As we tick off the days of February, the waters of Aquarius fill the meadows until they can hold no more. The river rises to capacity, and moves with a steady, mesmerising swiftness. Then, around the 18th, we enter Pisces and, contrary to Gareth's optimism, the inundation I had sensed, now breaks. Typhon looms large over Sommerton to claim his first victim, who I fear at first is –

Miriam.

She arrives a little later than her usual hour, enters with the familiar quietness, presents herself at my living room door, as I write. I look up to greet her the same, but am arrested by sight of her cheek smeared with blood. The white of her blouse is similarly and alarmingly stained.

"Mrs Doyle? You're hurt."

She begins pulling at her hair until it hangs loose. It appears matted, again with blood. I am half out of my chair, but she waves me back down. "No, no, Mr Hunter. I'm well. I was assisting at the scene of an accident. I wonder if I could trouble you for the use of your shower, and the loan of a shirt."

That she says this in so matter-of-fact a way is equally shocking. "Em... naturally. Is there anything else I..."

"No, no. I just need to clean up a little.

I seek out my best shirt, my only crisp white shirt, held over from the office days, now reserved for weddings and funerals. Mostly funerals. Fortunately my towels are a recent purchase, at her suggestion – my old ones being described as: "surely too scratchy for comfort, Mr Hunter?" I would not have wanted her body to suffer those – not that I am wanting to imagine such a thing.Her body, I mean. But then this was never an eventuality I thought would arise.

Of course, given what I know about her, I do not suppose even the most horrific accident would leave her shaken. Indeed, I am more shaken at the news than she appears to be. But I can at least make tea, while she showers. I offer the use of the washing machine for her blouse, and possibly any other things – I'm meaning under-things here, though I avoid direct reference to them as such. What lies beneath Miriam Doyle's blouse is taboo. She notes my aversion to certain words, regards me with a sympathy, I think, the various

repressions I had not thought I carried, then she tells me the blouse is ruined and not to worry about it.

So... to the story. She wraps her palms around the mug and with a gentle sigh, she begins – again quite matter-of-fact. She had called into the village, was waved down by a distressed man in hi-vis. A colleague had fallen from a scaffold. The mobile phone signal had dropped out again – it has been unreliable, since the storm which blacked out the entire region for days. She sent him into the village to find a land-line, and in the meantime attended the injured man herself. He had fallen from a low level, but landed awkwardly. She had found him in company with a distressed-looking Elliot who had not known what to do.

"Elliot? This was at the rectory?"

"Yes, it was at the old rectory. It was not a life-threatening injury. The man will be all right."

"Just... an awful lot of blood?" I dare not tell her the thought of it is making me queasy. I was never any good with blood. Even a nicked finger is enough to have me fainting.

"Oh... one doesn't need much blood for it to look an awful mess, Mr Hunter. I'm sorry if my appearance alarmed you."

An ambulance was summoned by land-line from the library. It arrived, miraculously, in good time, and Miriam carried on her way. To me.

"So... thank you for the tea. That was most welcome. I'll be getting on now."

I should tell her to go home, but it would be a braver man than me who suggested it. She's fine. Of course she's fine, but then I only know that because of what Gareth told me, and I'm not supposed to know anything about it at all. There is a moment of panic – how to avoid letting her know I know something of her past, yet without appearing insensitive myself, which I most certainly am not.

"If you're sure, Mrs Doyle."

"Indeed I am, Mr Hunter. I'll have the shirt washed and pressed when I next see you."

"Well... there's no hurry for it. I was thinking the next time it wore it would be when I was buried in it."

A dumb thing to say, Richard, but she seems to appreciate the humour.

"Then I shall take especial care with it."

But what I want to say is keep it, that I could never wear it

again, knowing she had worn it. That I would feel... odd, thinking of myself contained in something that once contained her. And no... I mean nothing erotic in that. It is something more deeply psychological, imaginal, like stepping out on a dark winter's night to be met with the light of a full moon.

So, Miriam carries on with her cleaning, writes her list of usual bits and bobs that I might consider purchasing to further smooth the running of my household. Then she takes her leave, though for once the energy of the house is stirred by her bloodied presence.

"Thank you, Mr Hunter."

"Surely I should be thanking you, Mrs Doyle. I truly don't know what I'd do without you now. You have me organised almost to the point of normal functioning."

"Oh, you're very kind, but I'm sure you'd manage very well. But then we don't want you functioning too much like normal, do we?"

Ah, a bit of gentle humour coming back. No. It would never do for me to return to normal.

She smiles. "I was meaning thank you for not making a fuss, earlier. As I said before, I'm sorry if I startled you. I should perhaps have gone home first to change."

"Well... you did startle me. And naturally, I thought... but anyway. I'm glad you're all right. And I hope the injured man recovers."

"Oh, he'll be fine. I'll say good night, then."

"Indeed, goodnight, Mrs Doyle."

She looks at me a little quizzically before she goes – knows I'm thinking something I cannot quite express, but decides to leave me to my thoughts. And just as well, because it is a long time before I can express them, and then only to Anne, as I take my evening whisky.

"All right. Out with it," she says. "What are you thinking?"

"It sounds strange..."

"This is me you're talking to. Everything about us is strange."

"All right. I'm thinking Elliot should not have moved that stone."

Fifty One

I'm also thinking about my embarrassment – I mean, at the thought of Miriam's body. I think about it when I next visit the bathroom and find the shower still wet from where she has cleaned and rinsed it, perhaps still in a state of undress. And in a similar way I am remembering my embarrassment at Amanda's curves that night, after visiting the movie theatre – how I half glimpsed them, and then forcibly turned my mind to point in the opposite direction.

Except embarrassment is not the right word, is it?

And why not?

Well, I have been long married, and knew other women before that – not many, but women with whom I have entered that space of intimate familiarity. I have enjoyed intense erotic proximity, thrilled to admire, and even just to touch my fingertips to a welcoming skin. More, I have explored the many facets and foibles of the erotic, with playful partners, and I thank god for the memory of it still.

So no, this is not embarrassment, not prudishness. It is a different kind of resistance – not only a refusal to allow these extraordinary women to embody projections of love, but also the many dangerous guises in which Eros takes on erotic form. In short I do not want to go there again. Yet they clearly carry tremendous charge in both respects, but...

It is the denial of both I seem to have intuited grants tremendous power to something else, as yet unborn, and unknown.

We return to the desk, try to explore it in poetry:

Binding to oneself each breath
of our heart's desire,
and all its loveliness,
does the power of love itself
at length compress.
For we see it not as the rainbow,
not as the light of love split
in glorious array,
through the prism of desire,
but that the prism itself be,
the object of our love entire.
And if only, in gently opened palms

the heart's desire we could allow
its proper rest – not to enfold,
nor less possess,
then might we keep love's blessing
as the very air we breathe,
and as the ground beneath our feet.

There. But what it is, though, and how it manifests, I don't know – love's blessing, I mean. It is a transcendence, I suppose, a negation of desire, a suspension in that liminal air between heaven and earth. Thus I imagine we might bend human relations into something more of the alchemical tradition. It is how love becomes genuinely spiritual, running directly against the mythology of our times which insists we find completion in one significant other, in spite of all evidence that therein do we miss the mark, time after time.

Oh, fair enough. When we are young, it is nature's imperative that we do indeed bind, and thank heaven for it, and for the erotic, too, or there would be no renewal of life. But in later life are we not done with that? And are they not too? Amanda and Miriam, I mean. They do not carry my own years, certainly, but they are of menopausal age, no longer needing a man in quite the same way as much younger women in search of the conventional. So in what way? As mere bed companion? As someone to take out the bins, and to scold? As for me, were I to look upon such things in purely practical terms, would not Miriam be the more promising companion, given her nursing skills and the likely frailties of my eventual decrepitude?

You see how cold we might render things? And how deliberately, how mindfully, I refuse such compression into the banal.

Yet for all of that I do use these women – not physically, certainly, and not even romantically, nor with an eye to the future. But either of them could collapse the tension at any time. All they need do is reach out in unambiguous terms. Or do I fool myself? Do they not each sense well enough the game? Why would they not, since they know me so well in other respects? Are we not thus become a polyamorous triangle of a very particular sort?

Enough Richard. We are over-thinking again. What time is it, anyway? Heavens, the whole day spent on this one thing. Have we even eaten? Too late now – make do with some crackers and cheese

perhaps, and a little herb tea. Then bed.

The priestess awaits at the end of the dusty road, and the gates to the temple open. She smiles at my approach, gives a shrug as if to say: *What a day, eh*? *Come, let's get you washed down, and settled for sleep.* And as I enter into the temple's shadows, leaning upon her arm, I hear the gates close behind me with a reassuring thud. The night folds over us and I dream, but gently.

There is a young woman in Romano-British dress, but somehow Victorian in her looks, something Pre-Raphaelite about her. She had gone to the river to lay a bouquet of wild flowers – delicate blues and yellows – at the foot of the altar, but found it no longer there. Someone had directed her to my door, and I tell her yes, that I am looking after the stone since no one else wanted it, and that it might not count, to lay her flowers upon it, as lovely as they are.

I show her to where Gareth put the altar, but it's no longer there either, and her bouquet is wilting. She fears it will soon no longer be a worthy offering, and looks at me imploringly, that we must find the altar, then heaven and earth can be re-centred. Typhon might then be placated, Aphrodite and Eros spared the inundation.

I tell her I was simply holding the stone, wanting direction for where to put it more permanently, but this is not important to her. We must locate it before the sun sets and the moon goes into the dark. If I can do this for her, she says, she will know my heart. She sees the tear in it, and can show me how to thread the needle so I can bind the halves, but without stopping the beat, and without embarrassing myself.

At first this feels like a thin sort of dream – nothing so vivid as I have just described, but then my abiding caution around dreams, these past lunations, may be the cause of it. It takes an effort of stillness on waking to chase the threads and pull up the string of images from the depths before they vanish. Memory duly fortified I take the dream to the desk and write it down as best I can, even allowing in the occasional embellishment, for all things imaginal at this early hour are as likely to be gifts from the dreaming.

We resist the urge to associate, to relate images literally, though they seem to be speaking unambiguously. I turn to Anne, who is no longer looking down from the portrait, but seated comfortably, cross legged on the sofa with coffee. "Ignore the story for now," she says. "What's the feeling tone?"

I'm about to say: urgency, that I cannot let the stone lie while I

waited for a sign, but then I realise of course this is the sign, and its telling me to get on with it, to remember I am delegated by the priesthood, that I am to search my soul for an answer, that indeed in some ways my soul is the answer or at least part of the destination here...

And then comes a banging on the door. A little early I'm thinking, before realising it is already mid morning. I am not expecting a delivery. I open the door to find Elliot with a bunch of flowers. Delicate blues and yellows like in the dream.

Fifty Two

"Hey, Richard. Em... not sure how to put this but... is Moira here?"

His opening brightness is false, and fragile – something tragic in it. This is a deeply wounded Elliot, and I had thought him stronger, or at least thicker skinned than that. I don't know why, but I am almost disappointed the flowers are not for me, though that would make for too strange a rapprochement.

"I'm sorry Larry... Moira?"

"I couldn't think where I'd seen her before. Then it came to me – Richard's housekeeper."

"That would be Miriam, Larry. Miriam Doyle."

"Oh, sure... Miriam. She about? These are for her."

"I'm not sure if this is one of her days. One never knows with Mrs Doyle."

"She doesn't live in? Only some people I asked said... well..."

Village rumour, again? Who speaks to Larry that way? Is it the redoubtable Mrs Batsby? So, I am cohabiting with my "housekeeper" while also "seeing" the curate? And fair enough, I am a poet, after all, and we do tend to acquire reputations, at least to the satisfaction of other people's imaginations. But he looks painfully awkward, standing there, and I'm trying to piece together a plausible story for it, while wishing he could find a way to be easier in himself. There is no way of evading the fact this is a man of extraordinary accomplishment, and but for one small thing...

"Do you know where she lives? Only, I don't know if you heard... yesterday..."

"The accident? Yes I know about that. I'm sorry, but I don't know where she lives." He thinks I'm being obstructive. "Sorry, Larry. How is the guy?"

"Oh, he's doing okay. I mean... thank God. Thank Moira... I mean Miriam."

"Why don't we find a vase to put those in. You could maybe write a note. She could turn up later today. Or maybe tomorrow. I really don't know. She's a law unto herself."

Actually, they need no vase, since they come with their own. It is an expensive bouquet and he's clearly made an effort. I set them on the kitchen table, settle him in a chair. He gazes at them fixedly, his hands shaking now, like a man about to crack. I've seen plenty

of that... admittedly quiet men, thrust into the brutal ranks of middle management. But for Larry this is a different kind of alien environment, and no less stressful to deal with.

I hesitate to ask but: "So, how's it going?"

"Oh... shit. Absolute fucking nightmare. One damned thing after the other, and this accident is just about the end. There's bound to be an enquiry, now. Box tickers crawling all over the site. Health and safety and all that. No idea. No idea how it happened."

"But it's good to know the guy's not badly hurt. Miriam told me the gist of it. She showed up here yesterday, well... in a bit of a mess."

"I was useless, felt like a complete fucking dick. Then she showed up, patched him up, and then... she just held him, like... like a mother, until the ambulance came."

I'm nodding as I picture the scene. "Yes, that sounds like Miriam."

"But she didn't even know the guy."

"Deep down we're all connected, Larry. With most of us, it takes extreme circumstances to bring it out. Others, it comes more naturally. I could play the father to you. You could play the tyrannical boss to me. Miriam? Yes, she's been a mother and a sister to me. It just takes... a little imagination."

I'm not sure if any of this is going in. He's shaking his head now. "Just wanted to show my appreciation, that's all."

"And I'm sure she'll be pleased by the flowers. That's a thing with women. Have you noticed? They love flowers. Flowers will forgive a man most sins. But she'll tell you it was nothing, all the same."

"She doesn't like me much. I could tell when I called here that time..."

"Oh, now, Mrs Doyle isn't the type to judge."

"Something in her eyes. She looked right through me. Made me shiver. What? You think that's funny?"

"Hey... Larry. You have your enemies, I'm sure. But I'm not one of them. And neither is Miriam Doyle. There's just a difference... in perception, that's all. You have an energy. It works in your world. In ours it's disruptive."

"What? My world? Your world? Same fucking world Richard." He's agitated, bordering on aggressive, but seems to catch himself, remembers where he is, respects my space, though it's a little late for that and I'll be a while clearing him out of it.

"Sorry," he says.

"In your world, Larry, you look at those flowers, and when you close your eyes, you believe they're still there."

"Well of course they are."

"In my world, I read them more as sense impressions. Basically a mental picture, something in the mind. Close my eyes and the flowers are no longer there. Something's there, I grant you. But the mind has no way of knowing what it is."

"But that's nonsense. You can reach out and touch them."

"More sense impressions. Something lights up in your mind. Your touch creates a mental picture, releases a cascade of memories, the feel of petals – their shape, their softness, like a butterfly's wings. Now you, to inhabit your world you must also make a leap of faith. You assume the world outside your sense impressions is physical. You create a clear duality. Mind stuff, material stuff. I don't. With me it's mind-stuff all the way down. That's another leap of faith, I'll grant you, but people like me will argue our metaphysics is simpler and therefore more likely to be true – Occam's razor and all that."

"Well, I'm not great on philosophy."

"Oh, but you are. It's just that you work within a particular framework. Your world. My world."

"And her world too, you said."

"Miriam? Yes, she comes at life from the same perspective as me, though I'm sure she doesn't waste time over-thinking it like I do. She just embraces what comes naturally to her."

"Is this why that lump of stone out there means so much to you?"

"Not to me, personally, Larry. It's partly why I feel the stone is important yes, not so much as a material object, because like I said, in my world there's no such thing. It's more what it embodies, the charge it carries."

"Well... whatever it's carrying, it's your problem now."

"On the contrary, I think it's still your problem... I'm not saying I understand what's going on here. It's all a swirl of dreams and myth, and poetry. But as a starting point at least, I think you need to put it back. You need to live with it, somehow. It's an anomaly, I know. But you're a superstitious man, Larry or you wouldn't be nervous about demons. Yet you're also making way in a material world, and it's uncomfortable – uncomfortable not being able to explain

something in terms that make rational sense."

"Those stones are yours. I've washed my hands of them."

We know the work at the rectory has never gone smoothly. I want to warn him though that things are likely to get a lot worse, but I hold back. The reasons are complex. First, I do not want to frighten him as he's already in a fragile state. But also in planting that seed, we can make things worse as confirmation bias kicks in, and he begins to jump at shadows, perhaps missing the one big thing that's going to bring it all crashing down on top of him.

I can see it clearly now, or at least feel it. Unless he takes that stone back, it'll happen anyway.

He's nodding now, reminding himself of something. "Sure... those stones are yours. A gift, Richard. Remember? And I want a favour in return."

I wondered when we'd get around to that. His position is weak, since I've already recommended he take them back, but it's worth hearing him out. And what he asks of me is not what I expected. He begins awkwardly:

"You and the Rev..."

"Michael?"

"No... Amanda. You're friends, right?"

"Yes."

"What you said a while back got me thinking."

"Said? What did I say, Larry?"

"You remember? It was that line about how it was bound to cause a fuss, her being squeezed out by this guy – women priests struggling in a male dominated clergy and all."

"I said that?" I've a feeling I did, yes, but I wish I could play it back to make sure. "Well, I guess it's true. It's not Michael's fault. He's a careerist, seems a good guy, competent, and he's got the diocese on his side. And then there's the money. They'd feel happier with him in place, that's all."

"I can't have a story, Richard. I can't say why, but believe me I don't want any stories being written in national newspapers about Sommerton. And I definitely don't want the place putting on any goddamned map."

Right now of course, this is the least of his problems, but he cannot see it. He cannot see how he is drawing upon himself the very fate he wishes to avoid. "I'm sure you speak for most of us there, Larry. But I don't see..."

"Looks to me like she's already quit. Last I saw of her. The whole parish is talking about it."

"She's not been wearing the robes of office, recently but that's just Amanda's way of giving Michael room. She'll serve her term, and move on when she's told."

"There's more to it. No one likes old Batty, but she's wise in her way. Got her ear to the ground, that one."

Ah, Mrs Batsby is it? Listening at doors most likely. "Okay... Look, I know Amanda's considering her options, and she may decline another position somewhere else. She's been thinking about it for a while now. What's coming... the political situation here, it'll make it hard to be a particular kind of priest. And Amanda is very much that particular kind."

"I know. I know all that. But I need... I need you to persuade her to stay."

"To stay? But... even if she's persuadable, it's not up to Amanda."

"I got some influence with the diocese. I'll see to that end of things. Just... talk to her will you? Amanda stays. Everyone's happy. And there's no story. Sommerton stays off the map. Right?"

The accident yesterday has shaken him more than I thought. This is not a man thinking things through. He's panicking, irrational, and there are gaping holes in his argument, but he cannot see them. And as I watch him, I'm getting the odd feeling that the challenge in all of this for me is to protect him, that the river does not want to inundate him, wash him away, at least not if it can be helped. He has to be incorporated in its flow. But to protect Elliot, a man from a different planet, a different world?...

"I'll talk to her, Larry. Of course I will. But maybe we all three need to sit down together."

"No she can't know about any of this. She's too principled. She'll just tell me to go fuck myself."

"Well not in so many words."

"But you'll talk to her right?"

You owe me, he's saying. He brings it down to a mechanism he's familiar with. "Sure, I said I would, and I will."

So, we're done. He writes his note for Miriam, and I see him out. As I walk him over to his truck he looks at where we laid the pallets. The dream comes back to me then, and how they'd vanished. It's not exactly a relief to see they're still there.

"Maybe you're right," he says. "Damned things are cursed. You

should have let me break them up. Watch yourself, Richard."

"Em... sure. You too, Larry."

Fifty Three

I'm wrong. It is in fact Miriam's day again. She arrives bearing my shirt, freshly washed, ironed and softly folded. She finds me lost in thought, still stewing in the fizz of Elliot's energy, while staring at her flowers. There is just the trace of a quizzical smile, as she picks up on the atmosphere.

"Have I missed something, Mr Hunter?"

"These are for you, Mrs Doyle." Then I add – perhaps a little too quickly: "From Larry Elliot."

She notes my embarrassment, smiles all the more. "Really? Flowers from a gentleman. It's a long time since I had that pleasure."

"He was very grateful for your help yesterday. He,... was here an hour ago, left you this note. I'm sorry, I wasn't sure if you'd be here today or he might have waited." I do not add that I'm glad he did not, for I felt we had run out of things to say without venturing into stern disagreement.

She nods, touches her fingertips to the petals, a great stillness upon her, now. "I wonder what he'll be wanting from me in return."

"But surely you've already done it, Mrs Doyle."

"How did he seem?"

"Somewhat brittle."

She draws up a chair, regards the flowers more closely. We are both of us now, pondering the deeper meaning in them. "Yes, I sensed that in him yesterday. There was an... agitation. Perhaps we should open a window, Mr Hunter? Let some of him out again."

"Look, I... I'm sure the sentiment is genuine. It must redeem him a little, don't you think?"

"Oh, I'm still not sure about Mr Elliot. I rather felt he wished the accident yesterday had not happened."

"Well, I'm sure we all wish that. Ah... but, of course you mean the inconvenience. He was at his wit's end, actually, talking about the inevitability of an enquiry."

"And he'll not want the fuss of that. You do know who he is? I mean really."

So, Miriam is not fooled either.

"I get the feeling the only person who doesn't know who he is, is Larry."

"Aye... and well put, Mr Hunter. Oh, I'm sure he remembers clearly enough who he thought he was. But that was before, and he doesn't strike me as a man who can easily reinvent himself. Some personas are a lifetime in the building. Not like you, of course."

"Me? Oh, I'm a total reinvention, Mrs Doyle."

"No, not a reinvention, not entirely, Mr Hunter. I think you have always been a poet, just waiting to come into bloom. And I'm certain what we see in you is what we get, like with these flowers." She nods, looks inward for a moment. "The poor man. We'll say it was kind of him anyway."

"That's very generous of you, Mrs Doyle."

She takes the joke. "Forgive me, Mr Hunter. Had they been from you, I would have no such suspicions. Not that I would ever want you to... indeed you must never... well, at least not on this scale."

That's me warned then. No bouquets of cut flowers. But then I feel Miriam and I are more your sprig of heather or lilac, or a single snowdrop, plucked spontaneously from the wild. Our special occasions I'm sure will be more felt than held in a calendar.

Wait... Miriam and I?

She reads the attached label. "Ah, I see they came from Millie's. I worked there for a little while, you know?"

"Really?"

"Yes... it was very pleasant. Expensive place for flowers though. But then everything's so expensive these days. Anyway, I'll be getting on." She rises, then as an afterthought touches a fingertip to the petals once more, and finally, almost as an aside: "I'm thinking of opening a meditation class at the community centre."

This is news.

"Really?"

"Do you think people will come?"

"Em... I don't know, Mrs Doyle. But all the same, I think it's a splendid idea."

"You do? I thought so. Such stressful times, I was thinking. Can't be any harm in a meditation class, surely?"

"No. I see no ideological reasons against it, Mrs Doyle. None at all."

Yet she looks uncertain – is seeking some kind of reassurance. "You think I could hold a room, knowing me as you do?"

"To attention you mean?" Is she testing me? Has Gareth let it slip that he was loose with a bit of her past? "I... I'm sure you can be

quietly commanding, Mrs Doyle. Indeed I know you can."

"Then I shall consider it. Thank you, Mr Hunter."

I'm thinking I would probably benefit from attending such a class myself. I have my own techniques of course, but it's easier to maintain a private practice at home if one also attends a regular class. It's just that I am awkward among people, and I would not want to intrude on Miriam's life, away from Hill Top.

"Mrs Doyle, I wonder... might trouble you for one of these blooms? Any will do. If you will choose for me."

"Of course. This one perhaps?" She point to the blue.

"And that one is?..."

"Hyancinth, a flower bound to death and transformation."

"Really?"

"But it also suggests memory, sorrow. It begs forgiveness for past wrongs. The Victorians were great ones for the symbolic language of flowers – something we seem to have lost touch with. Or would you prefer the yellow? These are freesias of course – a much lighter aura to them. They too speak of apology, but not in so grave or densely mythic a tone. Also I think they speak of trust and gentleness."

"Then I'll go with the freesia."

She nods. "You'll be laying it by the stone, I suppose?"

"You know about the stone?" But never mind that, how does she read my mind so?

"Everybody knows about the stone, Mr Hunter. Might I suggest we wrap the stem in moist tissue, and foil? That way it'll last longer. It's good, I think, to apologise for the wrong doingd of others. If only to protect ourselves."

Miriam comes out with me, stands a little to one side, but I feel her eyes upon me – that same deep stillness. I have not planned on saying any words. The act alone is intended as an echo of the dream. I'm not sure if I've read it right – one is rarely sure about such things – but I'm thinking the act demonstrates an openness to further engagement. I do not expect the lady of the river to forgive many sins on the strength of just this one offering. It also feels a little lacking in gravity as I fumble under the tarpaulin, trying not to damage the delicate blooms. But there is the sense of something electric under my fingertips once again, as I make contact with the texture of the carvings.

Imagination possibly...

So, everyone knows about the stone, she said. That was Mrs Batsby again no doubt. She is like the microphone in your smartphone, always listening, spreading your business far and wide. Except for mine. Mine is of another era, and quite beyond listening, or betrayal. Still, I don't suppose it will do any harm that word is spreading. Gossip will only know of the literalness of the stone, though, and perhaps elements of Elliot's hubris, rather than the deeper, subliminal truth of things, which in any case lie beyond comprehension.

Miriam is thinking about it of course.

But her lips are sealed.

Fifty Four

For most of us, if a power-cut takes out the whole village, our first thoughts are for the contents of our freezers, and will the power be restored before they've defrosted? It's an accident, a fuse blown, just one of those things, but for Elliot it is the Hollywood style precursor to a black-ops unit, come to snatch or assassinate him. Then a sleek SUV of the oligarch class comes cruising through the village, and he thinks the same, while we think nothing. And he fears publicity like the plague and to the point of paranoia, while blind to the fact everyone in Sommerton knows who he is, and doesn't seem to care that much.

Oh, it isn't that I don't think his caution is justified, for I have no idea of the forces arrayed against him. His world has layers to it I would likely find shocking. But in bracing himself against the more obvious dangers his imagination can summon, he neglects the one thing which is most immediately threatening to him. And it is the thing he cannot see for its metaphysical nature, this in spite of his religion and claims of influence with his God's authority on earth. And therein we see it clearly: that the danger arises most from hubris – something the gods have always taken a dim view of.

We are into March by the time I am able to think all of this through, and to then meet with Amanda, having eventually worked out what to say to her, and rehearsed in my mind how best to say it. I send her a text message, leave my phone switched on in anticipation of a reply, which comes within the hour. We meet at Wendys, but I ask if she will wear her robes of office, that for the most part, this will be official business, that it is a priestess I have need of. For this purpose, I have also spoken with Anton and reserved for us a table in a quiet corner. We might be seen, and stories spun from our half observed expressions, but I am determined we shall not be over-heard or understood.

The way I see it, the church has a duty of pastoral care, not exclusively, but, in my judgement at least, with an emphasis upon its own brethren. And Elliot is of that creed. Who gets to be the priest here in future, who gets to control the parish windfall, the lands, the diocesan politics... these are the Byzantine profanities of power, and no concern of mine. I promised Elliot I would speak to Amanda, and I will, but shall pay lip service only to the profane.

There are more serious matters afoot, not least of which is his safety and, judging by the last time I saw him, also his sanity.

"Shall we say a prayer?" she asks, teasing. Always the humour, the sunshine, but she grows serious when she reads my face. "Richard?"

"We need to persuade Elliot to take the altar back."

"Oh, that thing. I should think it's very unlikely."

"Okay, let's try it this way. What happens in a parish, if someone comes up against a worrying manifestation of say... the paranormal? Or something... shall we say of a psychological nature that could be loosely construed, or at least suspected, as having its roots in... the unknown."

"Ah, now this is getting interesting! You mean like a ghost, or a poltergeist or some other spooky manifestation?"

"Trying to be serious here. It's the Reverend Amanda I'm talking to. Remember?"

"Sorry." She draws down her serious face. "All right, so far as I understand these things, there is a procedure. I'm the first point of contact. You raise your concern with me, like you are doing now. I listen, then speak to the diocese."

"And what do they do?"

"Every diocese has what we call a deliverance advisor. But these aren't like TV ghostbusters or exorcists. They're more like psychologists. They interview, gather facts in a very sober and professional way. Oh, I don't mean to play it down, but you know yourself such things often have a psychological, social, or environmental explanation. They're investigated discreetly, over time, away from the blaze of hype and publicity, and a decision is made if any spiritual intervention is needed. If not then we look to a more pastoral kind of care."

"Okay, that sounds... surprisingly promising."

"You think so? Look, I know what you're saying. I heard about that accident, and all the other problems they've been having. And just the other day they had an electrical fire..."

"A fire? I had a feeling things would likely get worse. Was there much damage?"

"I don't know. But no one was hurt."

"Elliot must be going spare. Why can't he see? Or at least suspect, and kind of... make amends."

"Well like we've said before, if anything can possibly go wrong

at that place it will. It could be more than one thing of course. That building's been a rectory for centuries, so we could be dealing with more than one ghost, maybe several things we've disturbed there.

She sighs, taps her fingers on the table while she takes all of this in. "It means talking to the Bishop. You're concerned for Elliot's safety, you're not a known crackpot, and there's a plausible connection here with something very old, and of spiritual origin. That's justification enough. And I was advised from the beginning to take special care over him... though I'm sure they weren't thinking of anything along these lines."

"I'm sure they weren't. Okay, thanks."

"For what?"

"Taking me seriously. But most of all for not thinking I'm a crackpot."

"You're welcome. And thank you for taking *me* seriously." She smiles. "It'll help of course... that I know the advisor."

"You do?"

"Yes. So do you. It's Paul. It's not something that took up a lot of his time but... well... he's told me things that would make your hair stand on end. This could be just what we need to get him out of his rut. So... can I change out of my kit now? only this is officially my day off."

"Oh... sorry. Why didn't you say. We could have met any time."

"I'm kidding. Richard... you're forgetting that I know you, and I love you. And while I've got you, I know you said you didn't want any discussion of your poems, that you didn't care what I did with them, but I'll say this, and just the once. I've read them, all of them. Several times. And they make me want to hug you, hold you close, and to reassure you you're not so alone as it must feel for you to write that way."

A tears in rain moment.

"Well,... sometimes a hug would be nice."

"Perhaps later then... but there's something else isn't there? I can feel it. So... out with it."

"Okay. It's... a bit awkward."

"Oh, the more awkward the better."

"It's something I said to Elliot. But I honestly don't remember. It was him who reminded me. Something about it causing a scandal, you being pushed out of the parish in favour of a shoe-in male candidate."

"You said that? I must admit that doesn't sound like you. Wherever did that come from? I shouldn't imagine there'll be much of a fuss about it, and I certainly won't be making one. It happens all the time. I see perfectly well where they're coming from. I may be no spring chicken, but as a priest I'm still relatively green, and they don't trust me to be loyal to the diocese over my parish. And they're probably right about that."

"Still, it's the optics. I think that's how I put it. *The optics aren't good*. It would cause a fuss if it got out, and it would put Sommerton on the map. I'm afraid I painted all you lady priests as militant feminists, and reminded him how the British press love nothing more than egging on a good scandal, and well... he's clearly been fretting over it. Have you seen him recently? He seems a man on the edge..."

"I... have my concerns about his mental well-being, yes. But... go on."

"He seems to think he has sufficient influence with the diocese to have the Reverend Michael withdrawn. He's very keen of a sudden for you to stay on. I'm sorry. It sounds like I was interfering, but the words just came out – like it was someone else speaking."

"And there I was all set for packing my bags."

"I thought you were going to tap Anton up for a job at this place."

"Well, who's to say it won't still come to that. But this is certainly a turn-up. Sounds like your old friend Mercurius was putting words in your mouth, Richard. We'll have to see what happens next but... thank you, for letting me know."

"He seems to think you've already quit."

"Really? Ooh no. I'm sticking around to see this one out, especially now as things are becoming so interesting."

She reaches across the table suddenly, presses my arm. "I'm sorry. This is all my fault."

"I don't see what else you could have done."

"No, I mean... we agreed the altar was to be included in the half of the rectory the church still owns. Indeed, it was he who insisted – said it was our responsibility. Which means he had no business gifting it to anybody without speaking to me first, no matter what the council's report said. So... he thinks he's well in with the bishop does he?"

"I'm sure he is. Indeed, we know he is."

"Well, I can't exactly boast that I have the boss's ear, but I do know somebody who does."

Fifty Five

Late evening at Hill Top. The lack of sun these past weeks has led to a depletion of energy. I am running the lights on low in order to keep the refrigerator going. It leads to an intimate softness, though daylight perceptibly advancing through the season, into previously forgotten territory. It's quite dark now though, and I'm sitting in my easy chair with a glass of evening whisky. I have set the bottle down on the rug. The bottle slides away. I catch it, steady it, set it down again, carefully. It slides away again.

Odd.

There is a moment of rational analysis, and then the realisation I am dreaming, though hazy at first. *Am I? Am I dreaming this?* Then perceptions begin to sharpen as the dream expands and takes on detail. All is as it should be, the room, my sense of self, everything... or at least the dream is telling me so which, as with all dreams, is sufficient law to be taken as truth. On the sofa opposite sits Miriam. She is unaware of me, her attention instead drawn to the sleeve of my old Harris Tweed jacket which she appears to be darning. She has a very studious look about her, as she peers intently through a pair of half moon spectacles.

Then comes the rush, the feeling of being granted the keys to paradise, or at least a playground without consequences – fully conscious and aware in the dream world. They call it lucidity. It has happened to me before, but always comes with a subtle spin. I always turn it back, and the dream accepts the refusal, weaves the lucidity into the dream itself, grants me the sense I am only dreaming I am lucid. Another part of me, long ago, concluded it would be dangerous, disruptive to go along with.

I wake then with the sense of something unresolved, of a power having moved through me and found no consummation. Is it the river again? Is it another manifestation of that Piscean inundation? Is it a case of my self awareness spilling over into where it shouldn't. And what was Miriam doing there?

Curious, I retrieve the jacket from the wardrobe. Truth be told, it's older than me, belonged to my father, though he had little wear out of it. I suppose in clinging to it, I have felt I am carrying the archetype of my ancestry forward. And for all it great age, I had thought the jacket still pristine – a little old fashioned of course but

not totally out of place. It takes a moment to find the damage – not unsightly, but painful all the same, like a deep wound in something I had thought foundational. Am I to pay a price for my involvement in this affair? Is collatoral damage unavoidable?

Years ago every town would have had a tailor who might have been consulted about repairing such a thing. Nowadays it would be a big-city trip, and most likely still a shake of the head, for no one actually cares to maintain and repair their garments any more. And why would we? But in throwing such things away, do we not accept a future in which the threads are grown ever more thin? Thus the jacket becomes a metaphor, symbolic of a connection, a reminder of my own golden age.

I had noticed the damage subliminally perhaps, yet made no mental note of it. That's the rational explanation. And though it seems unlikely to me I won't trouble you by labouring any other. But then Miriam, seated side-saddle on my sofa, late into the evening, long beyond her hours into that realm of domestic intimacy, repairing this hole? There is a feeling of warmth, trust... and the regret that if I had only held on for a moment and spoken to her... what might have been said there, in that world, that we would never say here?

"Good morning, Mr Hunter."

"Ah, Mrs Doyle. Good morning."

Miriam shakes the rain from her coat, moves to hang it up. Long black skirt again, starched white blouse, usual vintage chic – if that's a word - but all of it unconsciously bourne, and that air of ease, an authority masquerading as passivity...

"Mrs Doyle, I was wondering..."

"Yes, Mr Hunter?"

"Might I have your honest opinion on something?"

"Of course."

She enters the lounge, attentive, curious... smoothes her waist with her palms, sits, rather as she was sitting in the dream. We need only the half-moon spectacles, which I admit I have never seen her wear.

"This jacket. Rather old, and unfashionable do you think?"

"Oh, now you wouldn't be asking me to comment on your personal appearance, would you Mr Hunter?"

Am I chastised? Perhaps so. Indeed, Richard it is not appropriate to press her that way. It's not something you would even have asked

your wife – but then she never really cared for the jacket. Well played Mrs Doyle.

"Em... quite right. My apologies."

She lets slip a thin slice of a smile. "However, that said, it fits you well. And you look very smart in it."

"So, worth... preserving you think?"

"'Oh, very much so. It's looks like a Harris Tweed. Is it?"

"Yes, it is."

"Quality like that can only be found as thrift online these days. Occasionally you see them in the charity shops, in which case it would be considered a lucky find. Is that where you bought it?"

"No, no. Actually, it was my father's."

"Well then... surely you can't be thinking of throwing it out?"

"It's just that I don't suppose anyone can repair them any more?"

What am I doing here? Am I testing the dream? Am I shaking the foundations of it to see what drops out?

"Can I see?" She takes the jacket, lays it gently in her lap. "Here? Ah, but it's not so bad, Mr Hunter. Easily repaired and no one would notice. I would unpick the lining, recover some spare threads from inside, then use them to darn it so it all matches. I have an old tweed hacking jacket I once repaired that way. Must be eighty years old, still looks like new. Would you like me to do it for you?"

"You could do that?I'd be most grateful."

"Are you perhaps thinking to wear it for your meeting with the bishop?"

Wait. What did she say? "I'm meeting the bishop?"

She raises a brow, conspiratorial, quizzical. "Rumour has it."

"Em..."

Indeed, word has escaped Channing House of an upcoming meeting with the diocese deliverance advisor, to which I am invited. Miriam has been approached rather clumsily by the quisling, Mrs Batsby, and the intelligence leaked in the hope of receiving further intelligence back.

"Mrs Batsby is a terrible gossip, Mr Hunter. I assure you I've told her nothing, other than that, so far as I know, you are a poet and a good man."

"That's very kind of you."

"But you – and Channing House for that matter – should perhaps assume Mr Elliot is also aware of your upcoming meeting, and anything else that may have been discussed in proximity to Mrs

Batsby."

"I didn't know the bishop was going to be there. Nobody said anything about the bishop." Am I panicking a little here? I suppose I am. I wonder if he's the ecclesiastical gentleman I saw Elliot with in town that time. I imagine he could be quite disapproving, and certainly unlikely to take me at all seriously – vintage jacket and bow tie or not.

"Oh, I don't know, Mr Hunter. But I'm sure you'll be fine. And then again... you don't think... well..."

"What?"

"There might be a little mischief at play, do you?"

"Mischief? Ah... I hope so, Mrs Doyle. Indeed, a little mischief could be just the thing that's needed. But... mischief?"

"One would have thought Mrs Batsby's reputation would be well known at Channing House, and therefore... vulnerable to exploitation."

"Exploitation?"

"The dissemination of disinformation, knowing it was likely to reach Mr Elliot's ears."

She takes out a pair of half moon spectacles and slips them on, runs a fingertip over the sleeve as if to read its texture like Braille. "I'm sure this will be fine, Mr Hunter. It requires a little patience, that's all... I was only thinking there may be a reaction from Mr Elliot ahead of time, which might render your meeting unnecessary."

"Then, I won't have to meet the bishop after all."

"Perhaps not, Mr Hunter. Now, have you anything resembling a sewing kit?"

"I'm afraid I don't. Just a needle and some thread for sewing on the occasional button."

"Then I'll be sure to bring my own tomorrow. This is a lovely jacket and it suits you very well. We'll have it right as rain. Now, I'd better be getting on."

"Thank you, Mrs Doyle."

I am a good man. You heard her. Miriam Doyle thinks I am a good man. I recall she once told me she knew what I needed – at least I think that's what she said. I was a little muddle headed at the time. But that she thinks I am a good man is the shot in the arm I need right now.

Fifty Six

The morning begins early with a visit from Gareth who invites me out for a walk. This is so unprecedented, it feels at once like an invitation not to be refused. He appears to have walked up from the village, suggests we drive back down and begin from the bridge over the Ware. There are no black hats today as there were last time, an over spilling reminder of events unfolding in the wider world. From here, we walk the river downstream.

We do not speak of much, which is in itself portentous. And to be with Gareth, when Gareth is quiet, is an unsettling experience, suggestive of imminent revelation. He leads me to the freshly felled tree, and the levelled stump into which I'd pressed that tarnished copper coin. And here he points to the sudden proliferation of coins tapped in since my last visit, mostly copper, some low denomination silver, all of it dropping out of the bottom of societal value, and into the realm of the sublime. They are a weight we once carried in our pockets, now obsoleted by inflation, and the self infatuation of the monetary.

"Well, what do you think?"

"I don't know, Gareth. I don't know why people do this. I've seen it in other places, fallen tree trunks bristling with copper, hammered in over what must be decades. Do they do it for luck?"

"I don't know why they do it either," he says. "Most likely neither do they, but that's the thing you see? They're connecting with something they've forgotten. Don't know what it is, or even if it still exists. But we all had it once, still do, lingering in the backs of our minds. So we tap a coin in, maybe for luck like you said. But always in places like this. Quiet. Green. Woodland. Rivers. Places with spirit still."

"Genius Loci, yes. You can feel it here. This coin's mine. It was the first. I pressed it in when I was last here – not that long ago."

"Then you started it. Why'd you do it?"

"Oh... a token, an open question... a calling for a sign..."

Gareth nods. "That's your way, Richard. These others, who knows what we're seeing here. This one? Maybe a prayer for someone sickening. This one, maybe a longing to be remembered. This one, a call back, some soul thinking to return in twenty years and hoping to find evidence of a past still existing, like a waypoint

in time... this one, that an unrequited love be returned."

"You should be a poet, Gareth."

"Oh, I leave that to you. Couldn't find the words for much of what goes on inside my head."

"Well, me neither. But what you're saying seems to be that we're witnessing the opening of another wayside shrine, not far from where the other once stood."

"That's *exactly* what I'm saying."

I venture a little way down to the riverside. Although full, it has a gentleness to it today, more benign than seductive. I remember the vision of Ophelia from last time, an abstract work in old tarpaulin and gaudy plastic canister. I wonder if she has made it as far as the Sargasso sea yet. The thought leads on by means of association to how long it might take the water running from the source, to reach the sea. Would it be days? Weeks?

And then, almost at my feet, swirling in a little pool, half enclosed from the river, I see the fragment of an ash bough. It is scraped clean of bark, flattened in the middle portion by a pocket-knife. And inked there is the impression of a labyrinth, from a dream I once had. It teases me a little with its evasions, but I manage to bring it into the bank with a stick.

Curious, Garth looks on. "So, what you got there then?"

"Oh, a mystery held, a bargain kept. I don't know how or why, but I think we're done."

He smiles, shrugs, turns away from the river for us to continue our journey. I stand a moment, thinking about this, but it's not for thinking about. More for feeling. I take the seal from my pocket and toss it back midstream. And for a moment then I see out of the corner of my eye a vision, subliminal perhaps, of a young woman moving along the opposite bank, dressed in greens and golds, but she transforms into a roe deer picking its way with timid caution.

Yes... I don't know how or why, but I think we're done.

There is a sense of an anticlimax, I suppose, for all I've ever felt is that I was caught up for a time in the river's flow, and now it has let me go, that things have happened, yes, and some of them I've facilitated, but mostly I've just been a channel for remembering.

I leave Gareth in town, and drive home, but find my return to Hill Top impeded by a flatbed truck coming down the narrow lane in the opposite direction. I'm able to tuck the car into the gateway of a meadow, while it passes. On board are three pallets containing

the much vexed and ever so literal stonework that has become a symbol of both the mystery and the absurd.

Continuing then on my way, I discover Elliot at the house, about to climb into his own gargantuan vehicle. Seeing me, he comes across to greet, and with a look about him that is less sheepish than it should be, at least under the circumstances. Indeed, he's more assertive, like this was going to be the deal all along.

"Change of plan," he says.

"Plan?"

"Over-stepped my authority, Richard. I should never have gifted it to you in the first place. Hope you don't mind. And you did say I should take it back."

Yes, I did say that, but only as a matter of restoring metaphysical equilibrium for his own good, not as complaint at a broken contract. "You reckon you can live with it, then?"

"Dunno. We'll see. Been driving me crazy, by the way."

"And what's that, Larry?"

"What you said about your world, and it being just sense impressions."

"Oh, take no notice of me."

"No, don't you go backing out on me. Not now I can prove you're wrong."

"Really?"

"I step out in front of a moving train, I'm dead. Right? Can't get more material than that. None of your sense impressions there. Moving train. Dead."

"Oh indeed, yes. But I didn't say nature had no laws, Larry. Clearly it does. We can work some of them out, observe them in action. They're repeatable. Others are mysterious and subjective. Knowing the former helps us survive long enough in this reality to pass on our genes. Developing a feel for the latter helps make sense of why any of it matters. But it's still all in the mind. Not your mind, or my mind, but just... Mind."

"Okay, so how about I catch a bullet in the head. Don't see it or hear it coming." I see his eyes flicker when he says this, perhaps in realisation it's not the best example, given his anxieties.

"Nature isn't here to accommodate us, Larry. We try to read it as best we can. We get in its way, it can be uncompromising in the way it deals with us. Best to learn how to go with the flow."

"Well, we can agree on that at least. So... be seeing you."

"I hope so, Larry."

"At church maybe?"

"Oh, I don't know. I think my brief flirtation with a return to the faith of my youth is over. The Reverend Michael is eminently functional, but he reminds me of why I stopped going in the first place."

"Yea, you said. I liked him, but he won't be around much longer."

"Really?"

"Gave you my word, didn't I? And thanks for talking to Amanda."

"Gave you my word." He nods, reaches out for my hand and we shake. I think he'll be okay. Sommerton will watch over him, now. "Mind how you go, Larry."

"Sure thing. You too."

Sure, I think he'll be all right. There is a character there, trying to take shape. Perhaps in exile it will have its proper chance of deepening. I don't suppose we'll ever become friends, for mine is not the path that walks with heroes. But,... well, it's something at least I am able to make some record of the man up close.

I had not noticed Miriam's bicycle by the door, and am relieved to see it. I feel the house has begun to enjoy her presence, respond to it in ways it finds harder with me. She recharges it. She is in the lounge, my jacket spread upon her lap, while she darns the hole in the sleeve, and with the precision of a surgeon.

"Ah, Mr Hunter. Did you manage to speak to Mr Elliot?"

"I did, Mrs Doyle. Thank you."

She hold up the jacket for me to see. "As good as new," she says.

"Thank you, Mrs Doyle. I really am most grateful."

"There's fresh tea in the pot. Shall I..."

"Em,... no. I'll pour. You'll take a cup of tea with me?"

"I will, thank you."

Settling then in the calm of the room with tea, with the ticking of the clock and Miss Whittingstall looking on, I want to share with Miriam what is fast rising in my breast as a revelation – yet so much of it invisible to the naked eye. But something holds me back, and I find myself instead feeling at my throat for the falconer's whistle under my shirt. I don't know why I had expected it to be gone. Perhaps I linked it to the act of tossing back the seal, but it's still there.

That part of the story at least is not done.

We move forward, now into something else.

She lays her spectacles down then, looks at me, her brow furrowed with a sudden seriousness.

"Actually, there's something I've been meaning to ask you, Mr Hunter. Something that's been troubling me recently."

"Oh?"

"I was wondering if you'd feel it appropriate..."

"Appropriate, Mrs Doyle?"

"If you were to call me Miriam, and I called you Richard."